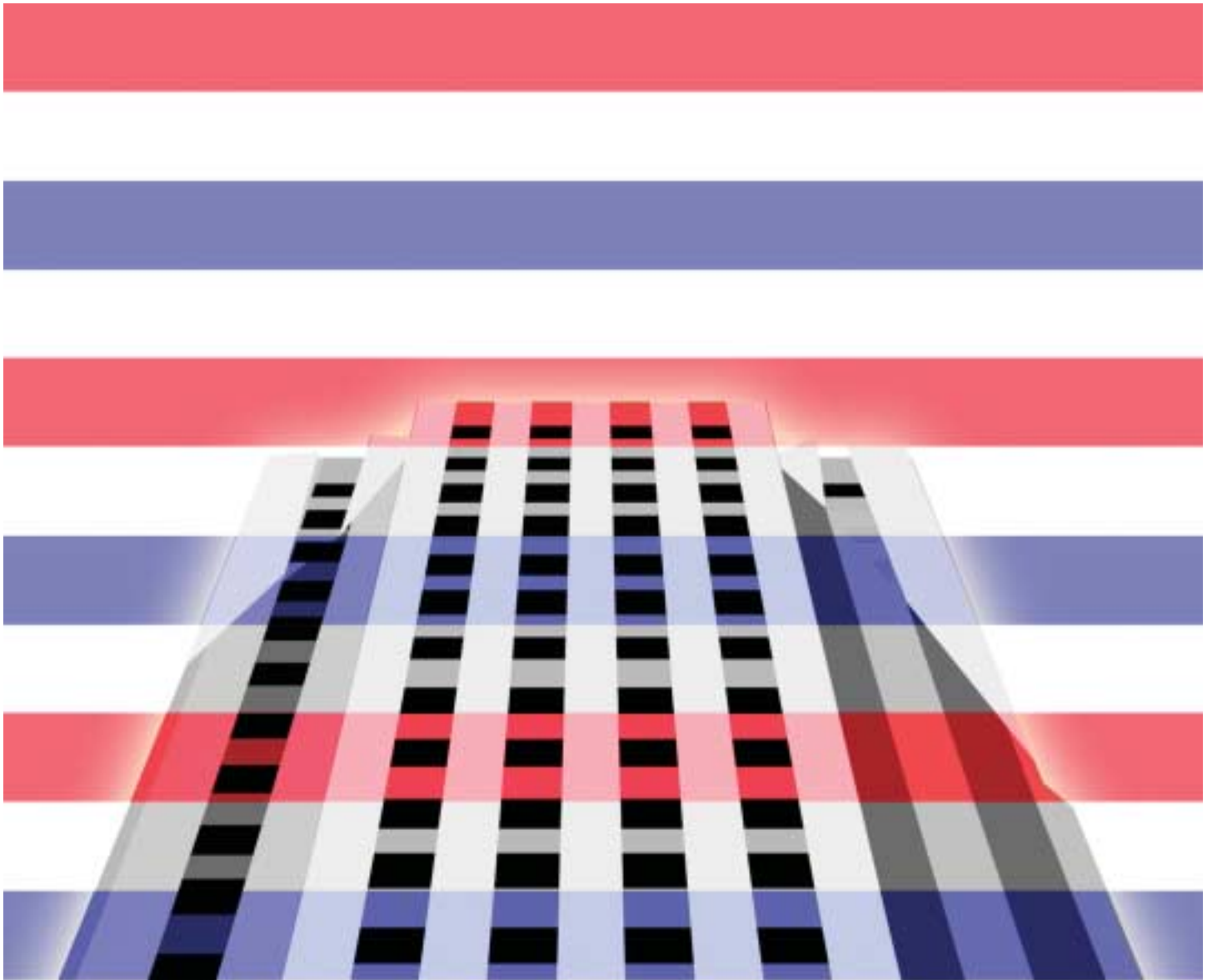


# Responsibility & Opportunity



## **An Analysis of Qualitative Research Regarding Communicating the Issues of Low-Wage Work**

by Meg Bostrom, Public Knowledge

Prepared by Douglas Gould & Co., Inc.  
for the Ford Foundation Project  
Making Work Pay for Families Today



Special thanks to Helen Neuborne, deputy director of the Human Development and Reproductive Health program at the Ford Foundation, and program officer Mara Manus and program associate Amanda Claremon for funding and commissioning this important research.

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# Introduction

When the Ford Foundation initiated this project, it defined the focus as being about low-wage work. The intelligence of this decision — making the focus of the project, at a fundamental level, about work — has been borne out by the research, and has allowed this project to explore a broader communications strategy than has typically been pursued. Past efforts to address poverty have been hampered by a series of core American beliefs:

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- Each individual is responsible for his or her own success or failure.
  - With hard work comes reward.
  - The goal is equal opportunity, not equal outcome.
  - Anyone can achieve the American Dream.
- 

The public sees the poor as deficient in each of these beliefs. Poor people are not taking responsibility for themselves because they rely on welfare. They are being rewarded through welfare without having to work. They ignore the opportunities available to them, yet want the same outcomes for which others have struggled.

Enron has created an opportunity to open a dialogue about the role of government in protecting society from unconstrained business.

By grounding the project in addressing the needs of those who are already working, this research demonstrates that there are ways to surpass some of these obstacles. However, the public is also conflicted about how to think about the working poor. Do they share middle-class values because they work? Or, are they more like welfare recipients because they are poor and not achieving the American Dream? People shift back and forth between an image of hard-working virtue and an image of flawed failure.

To lift the dialogue beyond the trappings of the image of the poor, communications needs to go one step further, focusing on the work instead of the worker. This means profiling the job category of nursing home assistants and the policies that are needed to improve work conditions, for example, instead of profiling an individual nursing home assistant and her personal economic conditions. The former allows an opportunity for a conversation about what is needed for nursing home assistants overall. The latter devolves into a conversation about how the individual person should work harder, get job training, and get a better job.

Furthermore, communications is most effective when structured around a values-based message such as fairness, opportunity, or long-term responsibility: It is only *fair* that those who work hard earn a living wage; good jobs offer an *opportunity to advance*; responsible companies know that their future relies on their employees, and treats them accordingly. Triggering values causes the public to assign higher priority to these issues, and helps people see the issue through a new lens. For example, instead of seeing job training as being about *helping* the working poor, it can be about *providing opportunity* — a more motivating value for most people.

At this point in the research, it seems most effective to communicate policies through the example of a specific job category, such as nursing home assistants or janitors, instead of low-wage workers overall. The broader conversation creates two problems. First, people think of teens, moms working part-time, and immigrants, when they are allowed to imagine “low-wage work.” Second, they are more likely to default to thinking about how to give the low-wage worker skills to advance their position, rather than thinking about how the job needs to be improved. Organizations working for specific policies would be well served to highlight the kinds of jobs that are necessary to society and held by those who support families. Over the long-term, however, the invisibility of low-wage work is an issue to be carefully addressed. If low-wage workers, other than the prototypical teenager who works at McDonald’s, were visible to the public, society might have a clearer picture of the contribution and needs of low-wage workers.

Importantly, low-wage work is not one isolated issue. It is an issue that connects to how we think about work, family, the economy, skill, capitalism, what it means to be American, and government intervention, to name just a few. Advancing the conditions for low-wage workers for the long-term *requires* addressing these other areas. Otherwise, any gains are likely to be short-lived.

Business has effectively dominated the way Americans view the world. As this report clearly demonstrates, the public fluently speaks the language of corporate America. People more frequently speak from the perspective of a businessperson's interests than their own interests or workers' interests. Unless a *cohesive* vision of the economy and society is created to replace the corporate America mindset, we will continue to fight the same battles — higher wages vs. lost jobs, work harder to achieve more, etc.

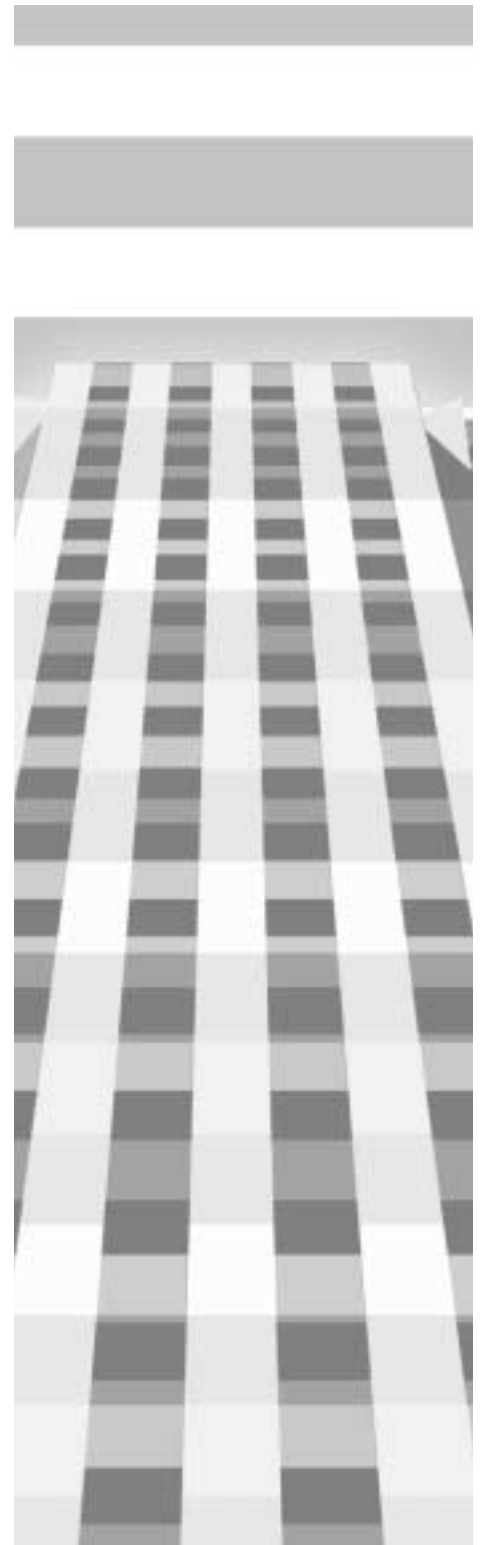
The public's way of understanding the economy, that it is a force of nature outside human control, is a persistent barrier to building support for government intervention. If the economy is supposed to be free and unconstrained, then by definition *any* kind of government intervention is not only ineffective and wrong, it is a violation of freedom. The "force of nature" or "free market" mindset of the economy needs to be replaced with a model that defines the economy as man-made and controlled, making intervention the responsible thing to do.

Similarly, the tiered, or competitive nature of class and the economy is problematic. Low-wage jobs are currently seen as undesirable jobs that need no skill. The picture in a person's head is a ladder — the low-wage worker is on the bottom rung and it is his or her duty to advance. If

one has to climb the economic ladder to be successful, it means there is always someone at the bottom of the ladder waiting to climb. The reality is that many low-wage jobs are not transitional but are necessary for society to function. This two-tiered thinking is an impediment to valuing all sectors of society for their contribution to an economy that benefits us all. Instead of being stuck at the bottom of the ladder, we need to create a way of thinking about the workforce that values the worth of all segments of the workforce and rewards all segments of the workforce fairly.

Enron has created an opportunity to open a dialogue about the role for government in protecting society from unconstrained business. This is not an explicitly anti-business conversation; rather, it is a conversation about dignity and decency vs. immorality and greed. The truly immoral in society are those who profit at others' expense such as corporations that abuse workers, focus on short-term profits instead of long-term stability, and jump with their profits at the first sign of trouble. The advantage of this approach is that it shifts the onus for demonstrating American values onto the corporations and not on the individual workers. There is an opportunity to redefine corporate "success" as responsibility and planning for long-term stability, rather than ever-higher quarterly profits.

As this report will demonstrate, perceptions of low-wage work are so intertwined with the constellation of related issues — the economy, skill, American values, etc. — that unless we fundamentally redefine these related issues, the real circumstances facing low-wage workers are unlikely to be addressed in the public policy debate.



# Methodology

This analysis is based upon qualitative research (both focus groups and one-on-one interviews) with a number of audiences. Twenty one-on-one interviews were conducted across three audiences to investigate the kinds of messages currently being used on these issues, the priority the issue holds for interviewees, the solutions the respondents envision, and the thought processes being used to reason about these issues. The interviews both informed the focus groups and added insights to the learning that emerged from those groups. One-on-one interviews were conducted with:

**Community leaders:** local activists representing a variety of community organizations that are strong targets for mobilization on this issue. Interviews were conducted with leaders who represent such sectors as economic development, children's issues, health issues, the environment, education, civil rights, multi-cultural issues, religion, domestic violence, hunger and homelessness.

**Business leaders:** high-level corporate executives of companies that hire low-wage workers, or business leaders with particular expertise on these issues. Interviews were conducted with business leaders representing both global and national companies in a variety of business sectors including the food, hotel and tourism, telemarketing, health care, and investment industries, and national business associations.

**Labor leaders:** high-level officials at unions representing low-wage workers. Interviews were conducted with labor leaders of international, national, state, regional and city-level organizations.

A total of eight focus groups were conducted with engaged citizens, i.e., people who say they: are registered to vote, read the newspaper frequently, are involved in community organizations, and have recently contacted a public official or spoken out on behalf of an issue. Four groups were further divided by gender and party affiliation and two groups were conducted solely among African Americans and Hispanics. Specifically, the groups were:

## Philadelphia (December 19, 2001)

Democratic and Independent women  
Republican and Independent men

## Los Angeles (January 10, 2002)

African American men and women  
Hispanic men and women

## Richmond (January 15, 2002)

Republican and Independent women  
Democratic and Independent men

## Columbus (February 13, 2002)

Mix of party identification, women  
Mix of party identification, men

While several themes were pursued across all the focus groups, the dialogue evolved over the course of the project to emphasize certain approaches in each group. All groups included exploratory conversations about work, the economy, low wage work and policies. The first set of focus groups in Philadelphia exposed participants to a large variety of themes with the goal of identifying the few that seemed to have the most potential for shifting people toward policy support. With this knowledge, newspaper stories were created for Los Angeles and Richmond to determine how each news frame influenced the course of the conversation on these issues. Finally, in Columbus, the group conversation explored connections with three meta-messages that had emerged from the prior groups: corporate responsibility, balancing work and family, and the disappearing middle-class.

# Existing Landscape of Public Opinion

## Perceptions of Class

Communicating the issue of low-wage work requires an understanding of the dynamics of class in American society. Americans are in many ways a society without class-consciousness. We all believe that anyone can grow up to be President. Many of us pride ourselves on our humble beginnings. However, class associations are alive and well — not based on income, but on perceived values, particularly work values. The “middle-class,” from a shared values perspective, encompasses most Americans — those who get up and go to work everyday. The “rich” or “upper class” may work, but do not need to. The “poor” are too lazy to work; they collect welfare instead. The term “working poor” brings a mix of associations to mind — they work, but they are impoverished. On the one hand they share the values of the middle-class (work and responsibility), but on the other hand, they must have some fatal flaw since they continue to be poor.

Focus group participants make distinctions between the classes based on values and work, rather than dollars. “I think there is a better way to do it than putting the numbers on it,” suggested an Ohio man. “If you have to get up in the morning to go to work, you are in the middle-class. If you can’t make a living when you do get up in the morning to go to work, you are in the poor class.” Another added, “If you aren’t losing sleep about losing your job, then I guess you are upper class.” They think of poor as “a relative term. I think it is where you can barely eke out enough to live in a place (Philadelphia man).” “In some ways I see poor as a state of mind,” added another Philadelphia man. “I know some people are stuck and they can’t get out, but I also know a lot of people who had very little and worked through it all because their state of mind was different.”

The public’s image of the poor is intertwined with perceptions of welfare and inability to work — either through lack of skills or lack of desire. They are “stuck, inner city people,” “lazy,” with “no opportunities,” and “no skills.” Interestingly, they hold these perceptions even though most believe

that large numbers of Americans are poor. Focus group respondents’ estimates of the proportion of Americans who are poor ranges from as low as 5 percent to as high as 80 percent, with the average response being about 30 percent.

The associations with welfare, even when talking about working poor, are due to the suggestion of subsidies or other help for those in need. Americans are supposed to be independent, they believe, to not need help from anyone. Getting subsidies causes some to feel the poor are allowed choices they do not have. “What gets me is that these people being subsidized for having children; whereas me I have to wait,” complained a Virginia woman. “I want to have kids now but I can’t because we can’t afford to. Even though it tugs at my heartstrings because I feel for the women and the children, but they get to have kids. I can’t.”

Poverty brings to mind a more desperate image. Those in poverty are “destitute,” “hungry,” “homeless,” “with emotional problems,” and “those that live under the bridge.” A Virginia man described poverty as, “Not being able

to feel like you can move forward; not knowing how to get the job; not feeling like you have the training to get the job; not knowing where the next dime comes from; not knowing if you have a house coming over your head; not knowing if you are going to be able to feed yourself and your kids.” Most see “poverty” and “poor” as different, with poverty being the poorest of the poor. “Poor to me is like going to the 99 cent store instead of going to the mall,” noted one Hispanic man. Poverty is the lowest restriction that you can get. Some see an emotional distinction as well. “One is the spirit, the inner self,” described a Virginia man. “Then poor is lack of money.”

## What Words Come to Mind When You Hear “Poor”?

Dirty.  
Lazy.  
Uneducated.  
Meager income.  
Welfare syndrome.  
I think of the South.  
Paycheck to paycheck.  
It goes on for generations.  
That’s a way of life for them.  
Food stamps, unskilled workers.

Low-wage worker, minimum-wage worker, and working poor bring to mind different, but overlapping images. Low-wage workers are either young people in their first job, or immigrants and minorities with no skills. Focus group participants see minimum-wage workers as teens who are paying their dues in their first entry-level job. The working



## What Words Come to Mind When You Hear “Poor”?

poor are also viewed as people with no skills, but they are people who have responsibilities such as children or household bills. In some ways, low-wage workers are invisible.

Low-wage workers tend to be “immigrants,” “minorities,” “high school students,” and “women.” They are working in “fast food restaurants,” “supermarkets,” and “warehouses,” in occupations such as “janitor,” “laborer,” and “nursing home attendant.”

There are two different kinds of low-wage workers: those for whom low-wage work is a permanent situation, and those for whom low-wage work is a beginning, transitional job. “When I was 16, I was a low-wage worker, but I had a family behind me,” noted a Virginia man. “I was a low-wage worker because I was young; I didn’t have any experience.” Another added, “I think part of it is circumstance. A low-wage worker on the front end could be somebody like we were talking about who is just starting out and getting progressed forward. Yet, it could be somebody later on in life who just hasn’t been able to get any progression.”

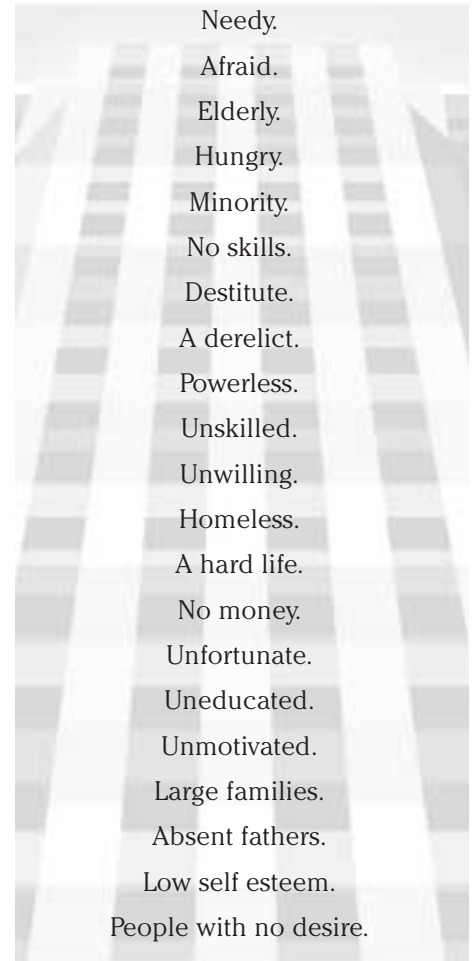
When thinking of the latter situation, those for whom low-wage work is permanent, focus group participants tend to think of immigrants. “A lot of immigrant people take those kind of positions,” noted one Virginia woman. “Our church has a lot of Cambodian folks and they typically will get that kind of a job. Sometimes they are able to get an education but a lot of times the parents stay in those jobs and the children, as they go through the schools and learn English better, they’ll get better jobs. But the parents kind of stay in that.” “I know of a place in North Carolina,” a Virginia woman shared. “We have a summer place

down there. There is a crab house and these Mexican women go in there at dawn and they pick crabs until 3 o’clock. They sit at tables and pick crabmeat all day long, hand picking. That to me is a low-income job. It’s seasonal too.”

When people think of minimum wage jobs, they think of “kids, part-time mothers, people who cannot work 40 hours a week, who don’t need to have to live on it.” McDonald’s is frequently the example. “It’s all young kids in there with hardly any education,” noted a Philadelphia woman. They believe these are jobs that should be temporary, not permanent. “The \$5.15 an hour,” explained a Philadelphia man, “is made for that high school kid, that low-level, introductory thing. Here is \$5.15 this year. Next year be gone.” “I hire kids for work,” expressed a Philadelphia small business owner. “I pay them minimum wages and I give them a commission. My whole thing is I don’t expect that kid to be loyal to me like in five years he is still going to be working for me. I expect as soon as he hits college, he is gone and I want him to be gone. I want him to advance himself and be gone.”

In fact, there is pride in having worked a minimum wage job. It is a value statement — everyone starts at the bottom. “We waited tables,” a Virginia woman stated. “We were file clerks, or fast food. I’m sure we’ve all had fast food experience. We’ve all done it.” Another added, “You look at them and you take them for what they are. They are a stepping stone or a means to an end.” “There are lots of junk jobs with minimum wage,” suggested a Virginia woman. “I thought so what? Who among us has not had a grunt job?”

The working poor are, “people who have a full-time job but all they can afford is the bare necessities” (Virginia woman). “No matter how much they



work, they’ll be poor,” explained a Philadelphia woman. Another added, “They’ll never get ahead.” “I think they face the worst of what a global economy means,” suggested a community leader. “They live in a nation where costs are high and the wages are low at their end of the spectrum...they lose their jobs to the rest of the world.”

The main distinction between working poor and low-wage or minimum-wage workers is that people think of the former as having responsibility, such as single mothers who have to afford day care. It is the responsibilities that keep them poor. “Probably the person has a lot of financial responsibility,” suggested one Hispanic woman, “which means they probably have a family. Is always out working and hardly ever home and just brings enough money to clothe and feed the

# “I worry that we create a permanent underclass of all these invisible people”

a community leader

family.” “Because they always have bills,” suggested a Philadelphia woman. “If you have a working poor family, they have medical bills. As soon as he gets paid, he has to pay the medical because he doesn’t get benefits. Then he’s got to pay food and electric, and because he makes just over the WIC limit, he can’t get WIC because he is a dollar or fifty cents over. Or he can’t get free lunches for his kid because he is 50 cents over. The way our government is set up is that most of the working poor just make that little bit over and you’ll never catch up.”

Repeatedly, focus group participants referred to the working poor and low-wage workers as invisible. “I think — this really sucks for me to say this,” one Hispanic woman expressed, “but the working poor, because the way they work, I think like hotels want...to present themselves. The working poor aren’t usually presentable.” Another added, “They are invisible.” “You don’t even see the person at all,” suggested an Ohio woman. “The job is always going to be there, but the person is never going to — you are never going to pick out the person as this job. It’s a shadow.” Labor leaders believe that “part of the lack of impetus around these issues is that people in other communities don’t see low-wage workers. We have to make them more visible. We have to show America to America.” “I worry that we create a permanent underclass of all these

invisible people,” a community leader remarked. “You never see them. I know somebody washes dishes and picks those crops. I know they are there but we don’t think about them or see them, from my middle-class position.”

Though people believe the working poor and low-wage workers are primarily poor due to their own individual decisions or flaws, they also have some appreciation for them. They are working hard, and working at the jobs the rest of society does not want to do — janitorial work, caring for the sick and the elderly, food service, etc. With some reflection, they recognize that these jobs are necessary for society to function. “I think about those people, like where would you be without the guy who picked your trash up every Tuesday,” remarked a Philadelphia woman. “There has to be somebody for every job. There has to be or the web doesn’t work. Everybody can’t be an executive.”

## **Causes and Solutions for Working Poor**

According to the public, there are a variety of reasons why a person would be working, but poor. Nearly all of the reasons point to bad decisions, or some moral flaw in the individual — high school dropout, single parent, drug abuse, lack of motivation, etc. Once they have started low-wage work, they become trapped and unable to improve their situation. The solution they see is taking advantage of the opportunity

that abounds in America. They rarely see systemic causes for poverty, and believe if people have initiative, they can get the skills to improve their situation.

Many think of the working poor as people who made bad decisions and then got stuck in a situation they cannot improve. In a focus group with African Americans, they pointed to “drug abuse,” “lack of education” and “illegal immigration” as some of the reasons people become working poor. “A lot of them are due to lack of education,” noted a Philadelphia man. “Most of them are high school [educated] or drop outs...It is very rare that you will find college [educated] in that category.” Inability to manage money is another frequently cited problem. “Can they not make it because they are out shopping at Marshall Fields?” an Ohio woman queried.

Others point to ability as the reason for being working poor. “I think a lot of people that are the working poor just don’t have what it takes to survive in a competitive society like we have through no fault of their own,” a Virginia man expressed. “It’s just some of them are born with a certain amount of ability and some don’t have as much ability. I think a lot of the working poor just don’t have the ability to do a lot of little things that keep you going in life. Everything from manage the money you do have to figure out how can I get from this step to the next step to the next step.”

The most frequently cited cause, however, is not bad choices and intellectual ability, rather it is a lack of desire and morals. The working poor have “a lack of desire,” “self-esteem.” “There are a lot of people that are poor because they are lazy and don’t want to work, or they just want to depend on their welfare check every

# Invisible people

## People believe it is not possible to eradicate poverty. “The poor will always be with us” becomes an excuse for inaction.

month,” one Hispanic woman explained. Another added that some are poor, “by choice because you see a lot of 30, 40 year old men on the corners asking for money.” One Hispanic man suggested that even the homeless have choices because they, “have the Midnight Mission. They have a place to sleep and they choose not to go there.”

The causes must be grounded in some individual flaw, they reason, because the requirements for work are very low. Any hard worker can achieve. “But if you are not a drunk and you show up for work every day,” a Virginia woman explained. “I mean these very basic requirements, they are few and far between to find people that are responsible. He can always find another job even if he does have a bad leg or something, I think.”

Once they have started low-wage work, it can be near impossible to improve one’s situation. “I think despite being lazy and all the other things,” one Hispanic man stated, “I think people get stuck there. I think people get trapped in having to work as hard as you can, as quick as you can just to keep food on the table and not be able to do other things with their life like going to school part-time when you are trying to do this other thing.” “I think of people that are just stuck,” a Virginia man imagined. “They are in this job that sucks everything out of them and by the time they get home, they don’t have the energy...they are stuck in a situation where they can’t get out of that.” According to a Philadelphia woman, the working poor, “can never make the bills meet because they don’t have health insurance or they always have medical bills. It’s a vicious cycle that they get into and never get out. They work and nothing will ever get them ahead.”

Since the cause of poverty is largely internal to the person, due to bad choices or a moral flaw, the solution is not more money. The money would be wasted if the “cause” is not fixed. “I don’t know if just giving them more money is necessarily going to take them, lift them out of poverty,” a Philadelphia man shared. “I think that we’ve seen that with the welfare system. People that are born poor or came out of that, it is difficult for them to even know how to get out of the situation because they have no basic skills on how to manage themselves. To be self-sufficient, I think, is a key component assuming a definition of saying that once I have what I have I am able to at least maintain myself and not go out and spend it all. Go out and buy a Jaguar or buy a big house with no furniture in it.”

Instead, the solution is that the working poor need to lift themselves out of poverty. One solution is to become entrepreneurial. “The employee at \$5.15 an hour can get up the gumption to start his own cleaning business and work for himself and maybe get that \$10 an hour that his boss is getting himself,” a Virginia woman recommended. Another solution is for families to stay together. “I think if families would stay together and earn,” suggested a Philadelphia man, “even if it is \$5.15 an hour and stay in the same household together and learn how to get along with each other and pool all your money together, one at a time you will have your American dream.”

But the main solution is hard work and taking advantage of opportunity. Focus group participants believe that opportunity is limitless in America. “I don’t think anyone is holding anybody back,” argued a Philadelphia man. “I think the opportunity is there. If you want it, you go out and get it. I also think that it is not up to the

government or anybody else to create the opportunities. Opportunities are out there. You need to create them for yourself.” “I have a brother that barely made it out of high school and he is now making \$300,000 a year,” noted a Philadelphia woman. “No education; none whatsoever. He sells real estate. He brought himself up by his own bootstraps and worked at Burger King, 70–80 hours a week and now he is making at least \$300,000 a year.” “There has got to be a way to get them out of that \$5.15, to get them out of the dead-end,” a Philadelphia man remarked. “It is not raising the minimum wage, it is giving them the opportunity to advance.”

Finally, though people want to see the working poor improve their situation, they feel there will always be poor people. “There has always been the working poor,” noted a Philadelphia man. “I think there will always be the working poor, and for some of the reasons Sal said, it will always ratchet itself up. There will always be that. I don’t know if you can correct something that seemingly will be there forever.” “There is always going to be a component of poverty,” suggested another. “I think we’re leaving more of it behind than ever before but I think the spread of wealth is getting greater and greater all the time. But I still believe there has been poor and there will always be poor and to try to address them is something admirable, but I really doubt that we’re ever going to really be able to correct it.”

# “Our notion of skill needs to be rethought.”

labor leader

## The Public’s Application of Economic Theory

The public has internalized a system of thinking about work, wages, and the economy based on principles of the capitalist economy — globalization, free market, profit-orientation, inflation, and supply and demand. They readily see the world through a business perspective and want to reject any policies that would even marginally hamper business. At the same time, they also apply free trade principles to business when it comes to government policies friendly to business.

The public has a well-developed thought process for how the economy works. Wages are tied to skill level and demand for those skills in the marketplace (supply and demand). Workers have an ability to market those skills and choose their working conditions (free market). Business, being driven by profit, will seek the lowest costs possible (profit orientation), which may mean taking jobs overseas if wages are lower (globalization). They reject tampering with this system as socialistic and doomed to failure. The public’s internalized economic model, then, is a barrier to advancing systemic change on behalf of the working poor.

## Supply and Demand

The public’s model of supply and demand is as follows: as skills increase, so do wages. The most skilled workers are the ones in most demand. Therefore, they receive the highest wages. Because the market defines wages, the wages must be fair. This logic defines skill based on wages, dictating that lower wage jobs must have no skills.

The public believes that wages are tied to skill level and demand for skills. Skilled work is work that requires “education” or “training,” which can include blue collar positions such as “tradesmen,” “carpenters, electricians,” “pipe fitters, steam fitters, boiler makers,” “plumbers,” “auto mechanics,” and “truck drivers,” or white collar positions such as “professionals,” “middle management,” “doctors,” and “engineers.” “I went from clerk to executive secretary and I had stenography so I was skilled,” explained a Philadelphia woman.

Unskilled workers are those with no education and no skills, holding

“menial” positions including “laborers” and “McDonald’s.” They are “someone who really can’t do anything more.” “I think of laborers, people who push brooms, clean bathrooms,” a Virginia woman explained. “I mean really the lowest rung. I don’t mean somebody who has worked in a textile mill for 30 years that is shutting down because those people have skills. They may be limited to this machine and the fabrication, but they have skill.” Unconsciously, they are defining “skill” not by training, but by wage level. “The jobs we see as good jobs today were crappy jobs,” argued a labor leader, “auto manufacturing, for example. Unions changed it, the jobs didn’t change.” A labor leader used

the example of a nursing aide to suggest, “Our notion of skill needs to be rethought. A person who turns and lifts someone and tends to emotional needs, that this is thought of as less skilled than a stockbroker is a warped sense of skill. What is skill? Telemarketing, airline reservation people, need all kinds of skills.”

A variety of positions that take significant training but are low-wage, are perceived as only needing personality. For example, the only skills that nursing home attendants need are “patience, a lot of patience,” “you have to love people, that’s the main thing,” “dependable,” and “a lot of stamina; a lot of physical strength. Innate skills, a lot of it is innate skills,” explained a Virginia man. It requires “minimal education.” “I guess you do need to know how to do — some of them you have to change them and bathe them, so you would have to have a little training to do that,” suggested a Virginia woman. “But it’s on-the-job training,” added another.

Day care providers, similarly, need certain personality traits. “They should be a caring person. A person that is very patient with children,” a Philadelphia man stated. “I don’t know if you have to have any medical training. It would be helpful, if they did.” Another added, “Yeah and be good with kids. That’s all. You try to get the kids to get along. You are going to have one sitting in the corner not wanting to play with the others.” Similarly, teacher’s aides are “women that have no other skills and the kids are all out of school, but they are still working as a teacher’s aide because that is something they enjoy doing but it’s also something they are qualified to do” (Virginia man).

Security guards are dismissed as “wanna-be cops” and “janitor with a gun.” The necessary skills are to “be

able to fit in a uniform” and “be able to stay alert without doing a whole lot.” Retail workers “have to watch your appearance. You have to watch your language. You have to watch your attitude and everything else,” one Hispanic man remarked.

Hotel housekeepers are “bottom rung.” They have no skills, they do not even speak English, and so “they will take any kind of job.” “They are like invisible,” noted a Philadelphia man. Another added, “You leave your room. They are not there. They come back. You never see them.” “It’s yucky,” but “it’s not a real difficult job.” “It’s not like it used to be,” explained a Philadelphia woman. “If you are in a

look at somebody who can go to college for four years, graduate and come out and get a \$20,000 job,” argued a Philadelphia man. “Is that fairly compensated? I don’t think so. Is somebody who didn’t have to go to school or maybe they didn’t get the opportunity to go to school? But the fact is they don’t have the skill level. Is that fair?” According to a Philadelphia woman, most security guards are fairly compensated, “for their talents, for their education... The smart ones go to the better companies and get a job.” “It goes back to the same thing as housekeeping,” a Philadelphia man expressed. “Minimum skill level. You don’t need a skill level. You don’t need to go to

seventies. I was a psychology major and thousands of us were psychology and social science majors because we wanted to change the world when we graduated. So we couldn’t get a job when we graduated. I had to go back to graduate school just to get a job.”

If the public’s notion of supply and demand is correct, then one could argue unskilled jobs should be among the best paid. A large proportion of the jobs in America are “unskilled” and in many industries they are among the most difficult to fill and retain. “The number of jobs we are talking about is huge,” noted a labor leader. “At least a quarter of the workforce, depending on how you cut

## If the public’s notion of supply and demand is correct, then one could argue unskilled jobs should be among the best paid.

room for four days, they don’t change the sheets every day any more. They used to go in and they changed sheets every day.” Since the position is perceived as requiring no skill, “they are compensated fairly for the skill level” (Philadelphia man).

Housekeepers with more skill are paid more. “But their housekeeping staff was better paid because they had to put on a good show,” noted a Philadelphia woman. “They had to have the right accent. They had to wear the right thing. They had to behave a certain way, so they were paid extra. They were tipped better because you had pretty high-paid businessmen staying there.”

While most focus group participants believe people in these positions are underpaid, they also believe they are “fairly compensated.” While this may sound like a conflict, participants explain the distinction as everyone is underpaid, but skills and the market determine fair compensation. “You

college. You don’t need to go to high school.” Migrant farm workers, “are getting paid what other people doing the same thing that they do get paid. So are they compensated fairly based upon other migrant laborers, workers, pickers,” explained a Philadelphia man.

In the public’s model of supply and demand in wages, there is more at play than just skill. “All the skills in the world don’t mean anything if there is no demand,” a Philadelphia man explained. That means those who are currently low-wage today can become high-wage if fewer enter those positions. “Talk about supply and demand,” remarked a Philadelphia man. “If we are all computer literate and we’re all smart, what is the job worth anymore? The carpenter will be worth more because he’ll know how to hang a door.” “Demand and supply at the time,” noted a Philadelphia woman. “I was in college for an undergraduate during the

it are unskilled. Forty percent require only short-term on-the-job training. This makes up a huge part of our economy. They are not stepping stone jobs. We are going to have to deal with these jobs and what they provide.” An executive in the hotel and tourism industry noted, “The positions that people don’t want to do, like housekeeping and dishwashing are the toughest to fill. We will frequently have an open posting for those jobs because we know they turn over.”

### **Free Market**

Focus group participants apply a free market mentality to low-wage workers: any worker has an ability to market his or her skills to a variety of employers, to select the employer with the best wages, benefits, and work conditions. The employee is in control.

Focus group participants believe that employees control their own destiny. If one employer is not offering decent pay and benefits, or is not treating workers with respect, then the employee can simply get another job. “A good job is one that offers decent pay and benefits,” a Virginia woman stated. “That’s what everybody wants in a job, decent pay and benefits. Respect for the worker and an opportunity to learn and to grow — that is what everybody wants. I can’t imagine why any American would settle for anything less than that. Why should they?” A Virginia man added, “You’ve got these low-paying jobs and you see these other jobs out there and you can aspire. Get this job, go to another job and get the training and move on up to these companies that pay good. You don’t have to stay down there.”

A labor leader voiced frustration with this public perception. “There has to be a dismissal of the notion of an opportunity society — the idea that if you haven’t made it, you are not diligent enough. If you look at most higher wage jobs, most are protected in the marketplace. Doctors, lawyers, accountants, etc., all limit the people in the market to keep the cost of services up. The low-wage jobs are actually the freest market.”

In tight markets, the low-wage jobs can be the hardest to fill, but this does not necessarily lead to higher wages. “Labor intensive jobs, such as house-keeping, are the most difficult and the biggest needs,” noted one business leader. “They’ve historically been difficult, but as the labor market tightened, they could stretch to the next tier of positions. Just out of lack of anybody else out there. That put more pressure on entry level.”

One business leader, who believes that skills are the key to advancement, says

that what is lost in the debate is how difficult this can be: “I’ve seen a lot of victories, single moms getting college degrees. But what you are asking people at the bottom of the wage scale is to make life decisions equivalent to you changing your career mid-stream. Changing course takes a lot of courage.”

### **Inflation**

Focus group participants believe the economy will not allow for higher wages for low-wage workers. If

“If you keep on raising the bottom, you raise the top.”

wages are increased for the lowest paid workers, the price of products will become unaffordable, and more pressure will be put on the wages of workers up the line.

Wage increases have an effect on the rest of the economy. One effect, according to focus group participants, is increased prices for products. “If they raise the minimum wage,” one Philadelphia woman remarked, “that is not going to solve it because then everything is just going to go up because now they’ve got to justify the pay raise.” In discussing the wages of migrant farm workers, one participant explained, “We’ve got a country that depends on cheap vegetables and stuff. The farmer can’t afford to pay the guy what he should be getting paid because he can’t pass on the cost to put the stuff on the market.” Another added, “It is just cost preventive to put that product out there. When we buy eggs, eggs would cost you \$5 a dozen, \$6 a dozen.”

Business executives have this same perception. They believe the market will only bear a certain price for their

product or service, therefore they cannot increase wages. “Because of the demands of the customers, we can’t pay just any wage. There is only so much people will pay for food products, hotel rooms, etc., and wages are a big part of the cost and subject to competitive pressure and consumer demands.”

Secondly, participants believe that increasing wages for the lowest-wage workers has a ripple effect on wages throughout the workforce. “There is a need for that bottom rung,” noted a Philadelphia man, “that \$5.15 an hour

work because let’s face it if you pay the guy at the bottom more, the guy at the top wants more. It becomes a never-ending flow of where the bottom is. If you keep on raising the bottom, you raise the top.” This means that a minimum wage increase is only a temporary solution. “For two years he’ll be all right and after two years the guy at the top is going to be making so much money that bottom rung still is going to end up being the bottom rung,” explained a Philadelphia man. “So you raise him to \$6 an hour and in two years \$6 an hour won’t be enough. Two years after that, \$8 an hour won’t be enough.”

Finally, many readily accept the notion that a higher minimum wage costs jobs. “If you are the lone, independent Marathon station in a small town,” noted an Ohio man, “you’ve got a guy working for you pumping gas, you can’t afford to pay him that. You can’t afford to boost his wages. Other than that, you have to gouge your customers and then you are out of business because they are driving to the next town.”

## “The bottom line is profit.”

Philadelphia woman

### Globalization

Americans have a global view of the marketplace. If wages become too high here, those jobs are lost to overseas markets. This results in a greater need for education. Those without a college degree will have to resort to a service sector job, since they cannot make a good living at desirable factory jobs, which have gone overseas. Young people, or displaced workers, need to achieve higher levels of training and education. Even so, Americans still see this country as the economic world leader and bursting with opportunity.

The American economy has changed, according to focus group participants, because “good” jobs, i.e., factory jobs, have been lost to overseas markets, and been replaced by service sector jobs. “We traded a lot of hard jobs that really put people to work,” noted a Philadelphia man, “for service jobs. You’ve got the service job — just the word service — where is the top? Where do you expect to go with a service job? Like you want to still be in a service job in 10 years?” “One of the reasons we don’t have our factory workers anymore in this country like we used to is we can’t afford to pay them because the unions came in and they are so much higher paid salary wise than they can get overseas,” a Philadelphia woman remarked. “We’ve got global marketing now. We have to compete. In order for the companies to survive in this country, the large corporations, we have to compete.” “That is why our textile industry in the South is gone because all those jobs have moved to Southeast Asia and Mexico and places like that,” noted a Virginia woman. “We have sold our workforce down the

river for cheap goods. Everything you own virtually is made in China, made in Malaysia, made in Mexico. That’s because people work there very cheaply.”

The solution they see is to “bring those jobs back from overseas for the solid middle-class — factory jobs we used to have like build cars and things. You will solve your problem of the lower end because the whole wealth will go up. You will have your middle-class. It will help what is now regarded as the lower class because the wages will be competitive. The school bus driver can go get that factory job. Factory jobs used to be good paying jobs. It wasn’t glamorous work but it was good, solid work and got good pay” (Ohio man).

Still, they reject the idea that the United States is not being competitive enough and will lose skilled jobs to other countries. “I don’t think that the best-educated workforce will locate to other countries,” argued a Philadelphia man. “They are all coming here.” “I think we have plenty of opportunity in this country. I don’t see anybody from America running to India for a job,” scoffed another.

### Profit Orientation

Americans recognize that business is motivated by profit, but they worry the profit mentality has gone too far. They see corporate America moving toward corporate greed — short-term thinking that sacrifices long-term strength. This does not mean the public is anti-business. Quite the contrary, they are very pro-business and have adopted a businessperson’s view of the world. What they are opposed to is foolhardy shortsightedness and immoral inequity.

Focus group participants gravitate toward the businessperson’s perspective on profit. “Companies are making \$99.25 profit if they are overseas,” noted a Philadelphia woman. “Over here they would be making \$80 profit or \$70 profit. So if I’m making more profit, why wouldn’t I spend less money?” A group of men in Ohio had the following exchange that underscores their profit perspective in relation to wages:

*What would be the employer’s motivation to pay any more than the market will bear?*

*It is going to be on the employee himself...*

*Ten people will do it for \$3 an hour, give them \$3 an hour.*

*That is one of the hardest things because you are always going to find someone that...*

*Is going to do it for a little bit less.*

*Especially if the folks that are working are not from this country.*

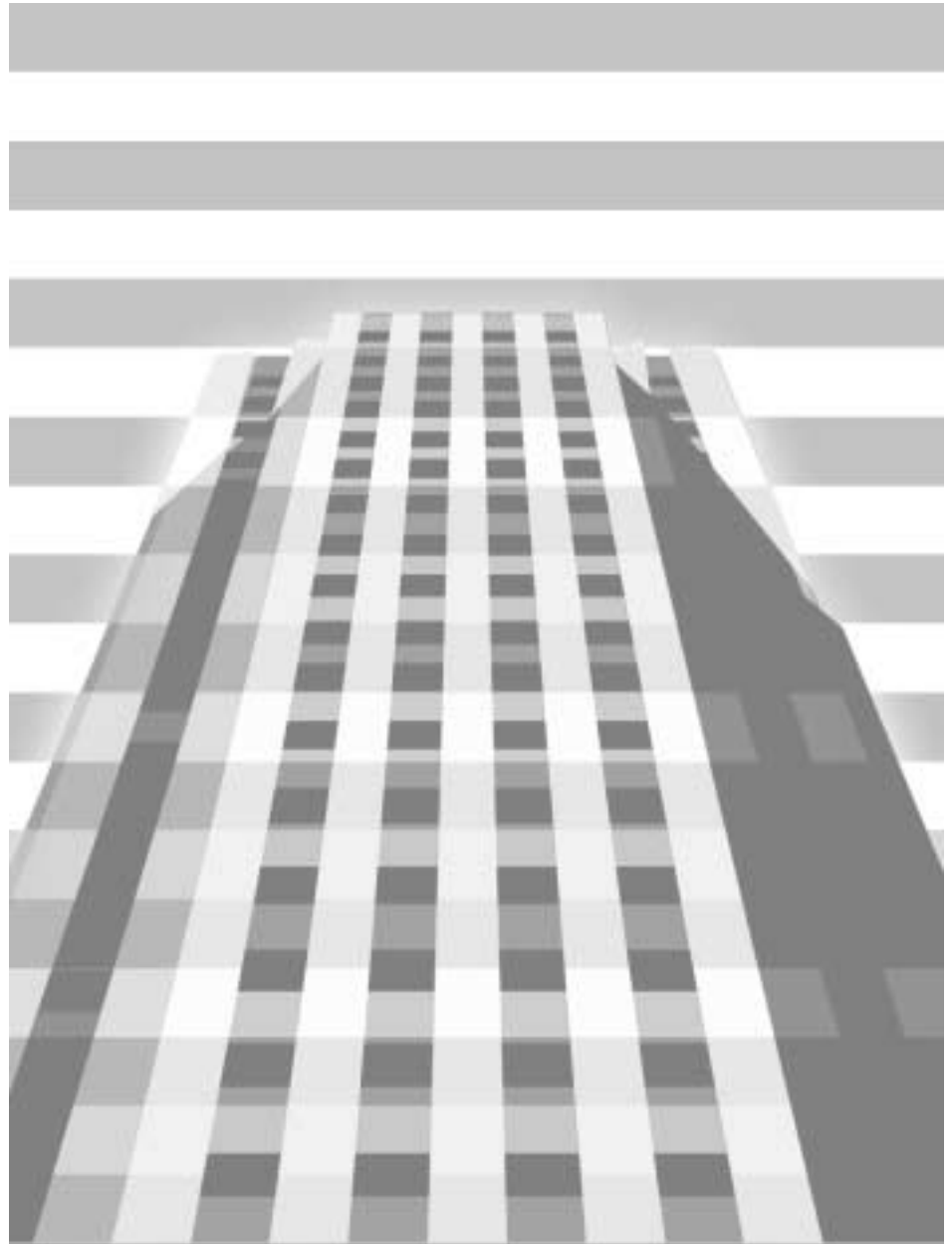
Focus group participants are loyal supporters of capitalism, and defend business against government infringement. However, they are seeing some unfair practices in the current system that make them angry. “I think the top executives want to make more money,” a Philadelphia man complained. “For some reason when you look at the statistics that they laid off 5,000 people, then you hear that the CEO or somebody in the organization made \$6 million or \$40 million. Something just doesn’t make sense there. There are inequities.” “I think you should be able to have your family live a decent life, not wealthy — just so you don’t have to go hungry,” stated a Philadelphia woman. “You don’t have to beg. You can put a little aside to educate your children. I think that is only fair when the big companies are rolling in billions of dollars in profit. My son always says,

‘You don’t like rich people.’ I do like rich people. I wish I were rich. I don’t like rich people who don’t take care of the people who are making the money.”

They see corporate emphasis on profits reflected in wages and benefits for employees. “In the past 20 years, benefits have gotten less,” a Philadelphia woman shared. “Raises have gotten smaller; they are closing the gap. They’re just trying to keep closing the gap. Mergers put people out of work. It’s merger after merger after merger.” “If they allow the system to stay like it is,” suggested an African American man, “then it is going to be less jobs because they have it right now set to where they are making maximum benefit for spending minimum on your labor.”

Many have had personal experience with irrational corporate greed. “My husband’s company was bought out about 10 years ago,” explained a Philadelphia woman. “They were making \$4 million profit a year; that was the profit. Two years later they were making \$3.6 million a year so they closed the company. They were still making a profit, mind you, and they still had businesses and companies working for them, but they were making less profit so they decided it wasn’t profitable and closed the whole company.”

Americans still see this country as the economic world leader and bursting with opportunity.





# Changing the Debate

The communications challenge is to redefine the conversation to avoid the traps inherent in the public's perception of the working poor. The communications goal is to shift the public toward support of policies that will advance low-wage workers' situation. Whether or not the public currently supports a policy is less important than determining the kind of conversation that will either gain or retain their support. This section demonstrates that there are some clear traps in communicating this issue. There are also some opportunities.

First, communications cannot be about the poor, about sympathy, or about balancing work and family. Communicating the values of opportunity or fairness will be more successful, but even here the nuances of communications can create difficulties. A conversation about corporate responsibility and long-term planning offers an opportunity to change the character of the issue into one that affects all Americans and encompasses a variety of issues. Importantly, redefining low-wage work under any of these frames will require very sophisticated, controlled communications to be successful.

## Creating Sympathy for the Poor

One common approach to communicating the needs of the poor and the working poor is to profile a sympathetic individual. This approach is largely ineffective in advancing political solutions. Even if the communications effectively creates empathy, that does not mean the public will support policy solutions. When focused on the individual, the public puts responsibility for the problem and solution onto the individual. If only she had not dropped out of school, or had a child outside marriage, or chosen to live in a bad part of town, they reason, she would be better off. Instead, the emphasis has to be on the work, not the worker. "The Horatio Alger story so permeates society," stated a labor leader, "that to make clear the problem is not the people, it is the jobs, is absolutely essential."

A significant proportion of the editorials and news coverage about the working poor attempts to paint a sympathetic portrait of the poor. According to Gould's media analysis the news coverage typically portrays the working poor as sympathetic figures caught between a rock and a hard place. Part of this is due to journalist convention to "put a face" on the story, which they believe makes the article more interesting to the reader. Another reason for this approach is that activists are

motivated by a desire to help and protect the poor and they carry that motivation into their communications with the public. "Don't take this the wrong way," stated a community leader, "but the easiest sell is mother, kid, especially in an abusive situation. It is much easier to sell people on the idea of giving us money for utility assistance for single moms with kids so they don't get kicked out of their homes." Many, but not all union leaders also believe sympathy is an important objective for their commu-

nications, but the labor orientation toward this story is less about sympathy and more about worker empowerment. "People can be philosophically predisposed to believe that somehow anybody who is willing to work hard can make a good living," suggested a labor leader, "but when you confront them with real people who are working hard and not getting ahead, it makes all the difference." They believe if people are sympathetic, if they just understand what it is like to be working poor, then they will support policies to change the situation.

However, this research clearly indicates that communications aimed at creating *sympathy* for an individual does not lead to policy support. When the public's attention is directed toward an individual's situation, they weigh that person's values and efforts, determining if they are worthy or unworthy of assistance. In the focus groups, respondents were asked to react to a news story that we created. It was less individualized and more closely tied to policy solutions than most coverage of the working poor. Still, most comments centered on individualized causes and consequences of poverty, and the ability to stretch dollars.

Focus group participants see this article as recommending an expansion of welfare. "The way this is presented, yes it is presented like a welfare program," noted a Virginia man. "The only thing that I know is the things that haven't worked and that is most of the welfare programs over the past 60 years," added another. "One of the biggest problems they had with this is they give the money to the individuals and it doesn't go to where it is supposed to go," explained a Virginia man. "I go back to the government fault for the welfare system because they encourage single mothers with kids," noted one

Hispanic woman. “When you think about it, when you have a young girl, 17 years old with two or three kids, she gets paid...I think they are encouraged — single moms with kids because that is where they get stuck because the government helps them.” Though it uses the term “self-sufficiency,” it is a continuation of the dependency of welfare. “That is not making it on your own,” argued an African American woman, “because if they need to pay for that for you, that is not making it on your own. That is them helping you pay for your child care, your this and that. That is them helping you depend on them.”

All of their assumptions about welfare then come into play. Is the recipient worthy, they wonder? “To me the essential thing is that if somebody is trying to do better,” stated a Virginia man. “I don’t want to give it to somebody who is not making an effort.” “How would you like to see

somebody spending that money like say somebody out on the streets and they’ve got two kids spending that money on drugs?” argued another.

And what should the rules of welfare be? “They have to restructure the welfare system,” complained one Hispanic woman. “Yes, I understand they need help and the general people that need help. But for a certain time, three months, a year not 20 years of your life, not generation after generation.”

They raise questions about the reasons for being working poor. “For the vast majority of people who have children, having the child, regardless of what they say, is a choice. You have made the decision to have a child,” explained a Virginia woman. “If it makes you poor, it makes you poor and that is the fastest way to get poor is to have a child. To get poor and stay poor is to have a child.” They

point to bad choices and morals as reasons for poverty. “How many have never graduated high school? How many have dropped out in 10th grade because they have gotten pregnant and had the kids?” queried a Virginia man. “Or they would rather just party,” added another. “It was five children in the same family at this school with five different daddies,” a Virginia woman remarked. “None of them were a husband.”

With the article’s emphasis on wages, focus group participants debate whether the working poor are spending their money wisely. Does it really take that much? “\$17.63 an hour and \$37,000 a year,” argued a Virginia man. “I disagree that it takes that much. Yeah, if you buy the \$70 jeans and the \$40 shirts, the \$120 sneakers.” “I know cases where the mothers buy all these expensive games and I’m a retiree and I can’t afford a computer at home,” a Virginia woman

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### **Between a Rock and a Hard Place (Fictional News Tested in Focus Groups)**

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America is increasingly being separated into the haves and the have nots. Fully 80 million Americans, 1 of every 3, are poor, with wages at about twice the poverty level or lower. The vast majority of the poor are women and children (58 million). We cannot prosper as a society when so many are being left behind. Poverty destabilizes families, and destabilizes society.

Try to imagine the plight of a single mother working a low-wage job. Even at \$10 an hour, twice the minimum wage, she earns only about \$20,000. That is more than the poverty level for a family of three, according to the federal government. But who could support a family on \$20,000 a year? A new economic study that examines the real cost of living across the state, says families with children need up to four times the amount calculated by the federal government to support themselves without public or private help.

A coalition of community leaders, politicians, and business-people are asking the state legislature to take a self-sufficiency approach to addressing the poverty crisis. “The federal poverty level guidelines need to be retired and replaced with self-sufficiency standards that more accurately determine what it costs to get by,” noted Alan Evans, CEO of a local production facility.

“Subsidies for day care and transportation to those who are working but still can't make ends meet, can help bring stability to families, making them stronger members of the workforce and of society. But businesses need to do their part and create family friendly workplaces with wages that support families, provide benefits like health care, flexible hours, and job training.”

Self-sufficiency standards take into account criteria the federal poverty level does not, such as the cost of living in the area, and the ages of children in the household. “What we need is a flexible system that provides incremental government subsidies of different kinds, such as health insurance, day care, or cash so that people can make it on their own,” according to Joan Johnson from the Campaign for Low-wage Workers. In a major city like Richmond, a no-frills existence for a single parent with two young children requires earnings of \$17.63 an hour, or \$37,000 a year to cover rent, child care, food, transportation and other essentials. Families caught in the middle — above the poverty line, below a self-sufficiency wage — routinely make tradeoffs and cut corners to make ends meet. Like Bonnie Chambers who wrote a note last week to her daughter's teacher — “Please excuse my daughter for not having these school supplies — we had to eat.”

complained. “My sister and I we don’t even have a computer much less internet. So they have to have everything.”

The article’s emphasis on the individual allows focus group participants to put responsibility back on the individual to solve their own problem. “I don’t want to see people in the street,” a Virginia woman stated. “I don’t want to see children hungry and I don’t mean to sound so callous. On the other hand, if you are poor there is your incentive to do better.” “I think individuals are responsible,” noted an African American man, “because I think once you hand over the responsibility to the government and employers, you’ve lost a certain amount of your freedom.”

However, this article does more than profile individual struggle. Its main purpose is to question the federal poverty level definition, and suggest a new method for determining when assistance is needed. By positioning the federal guidelines as hopelessly out-of-date and unrealistic, focus group participants, particularly minority participants, see why the federal poverty level needs to be retired.

What this article does well is question the poverty level, and move people toward supporting a different definition. The definition of poverty seems shocking. “You know how we used to sit up here and point fingers at some of the Third World countries — like the shahs and everybody had all the oil money and everybody is starving to death underneath them,” asked an African American man. “Now we’re the same people.” One

Hispanic man agreed with, and drew attention to, the article’s assertion that “the federal poverty level guidelines need to be retired and replaced.” He continues, “To be poor in Los Angeles is to really be incredibly poor. That is what I think this thing really talks about. There has to be some kind of flexibility in there.”

The shocking disparity between the poverty guidelines and self-sufficiency levels are powerful, but also problematic. The public wants to see the poor as “the other” who does not work, rather than a low-income full-time worker, perhaps reflecting their own situation. When the self-sufficiency wages reflect their own wage level, they react by questioning why those people should earn what they do. “That would kill me to see somebody with two children — single — a single lady who just totally doesn’t do anything for herself,” complained a Virginia man, “to see her making more money than me or \$37,000 a year. That is a pretty good income. That is not bad at all. I couldn’t imagine the circumstances that would lead — could you just see people that don’t apply themselves making \$37,000 a year. It’s a lot of money.” In referring to government assistance to the poor, one Hispanic woman complained, “They pay the rent. She gets \$100 per kid, whatever. They get food stamps. They get all kind of aid that she might end up with more spending money than myself with two parent household working. More spending money than the single mother with kids.”



Finally, part of the power of the message is having a wide-ranging coalition in support of change. “The thing that struck me was the coalition of community leaders, politicians and business people,” suggested one Hispanic man. “It sounds like a broad base of different interest people all agree on this thing, so it is not just all one side of the political spectrum.”

## Opportunity

Opportunity is at the core of what it means to be American. Two of the communications approaches tested with focus group participants triggered participants’ sense of opportunity. One was deliberately framed as an opportunity message; the other was intended to be a broader American strength/American workforce message. In both instances, it was the messages’ ability to reinforce opportunity that was effective.

In “Nursing Shortage” a critical industry was profiled as having an occupational shortage. Training and advancement from within was posited as the solution, with the extra benefit of providing low-wage workers with an opportunity to advance their position. What participants liked about this story was “it’s what we were just talking about. It gives people a chance to advance” (Virginia woman). Another added, “I thought the bigger question was how can there be opportunity in America if people can’t get ahead at work? The nursing thing is specific, but that’s the big picture and it is applicable in several areas.” “The thing I thought was important in this piece was fixing the broken step in the healthcare career ladder,” noted one Hispanic man. “What they are proposing to do is to bring people

who have minimal skills or at least have the interest to give them training on the job to become higher and higher and higher paid people. I think that is admirable.”

The health care industry as an example of opportunity has both advantages and disadvantages. On the positive side, it is a critical industry that cannot be exported. “Unlike this shirt or my shoes, I can’t buy my healthcare from China,” noted a Virginia woman. “I have to buy my healthcare right here.” Another agreed, “When I’m sick, I have to go to a hospital that is close by...It’s something I have to buy here and it is not something you can import. And it

is not something you can buy at a discount.”

The disadvantage is that the public is angry about the skyrocketing costs of healthcare and what they see as corporate greed. “They want less skilled people to try to do the work of the skilled workers,” noted a Virginia man. “They want the money; they don’t care how much the little person makes. They want the money at the top, the CEOs, the top corporate officials’ profit.” “HMOs are not going to put any more money for training those people,” one Hispanic woman argued. “If they can hire somebody for \$5.75 versus somebody that is trained for \$10, who are they going to go for? The \$5.75 person.” “When people get

so involved in just making the maximum dollar out of something,” an African American man suggested, “I think in other words the system has got to be revamped in order to get back focused on providing service as opposed to making money.”

If healthcare is a for-profit business, they reason, then it should act like a business and take care of its own labor shortage with the needed training. “If industry is so hurting for these critical people,” a Virginia man asked, “why doesn’t the industry instead of lobbying Congress, why don’t they get together and come up with a program for training these people?” They apply market principles to this situation as well. “It sounds harsh but if you just let it continue as it is,” a Virginia woman explained, “people aren’t going to want to go to that hospital if they aren’t staffing or paying their people properly so eventually over time it would fix itself because the hospitals want to make money. They are a corporation, so eventually they are going to have to pay the people more and staff their hospitals better in order for people to want to go there.”

The public wants business to be part of the solution, but doesn’t want government handouts or bailouts for profit-centered industries. There are ways around this problem. For example, people were supportive of a state or metro area instituting a training program through community colleges. That way, no payment goes to profit-making hospitals. “The local governments would get together,” remarked a Virginia man, “there is no reason why they cannot do that. We have a bunch of technical colleges, very good ones in this area and scattered across the state of Virginia. I’m assuming most other states have the same thing. There is no reason

### **Nursing Shortage, Nursing Opportunity (Fictional News Tested in Focus Groups)**

When you are sick, you want comfort. In hospitals, that comfort comes mostly from nurses. Now imagine that no nurse is available to provide the comfort you need. In hospitals across the country that scenario is very real. There is a shortage of nurses that will quickly become a crisis if not addressed. One solution is to provide the training and opportunity to advance from less skilled health professions into nursing.

Health care used to offer opportunity for advancement, but like many professions, the ability to learn on the job and climb the career ladder has become much more difficult. How can there be opportunity in America, if people cannot get ahead in their work? In the past, people could start as nursing aides and become trained for more advanced health care positions. But now these are dead end jobs because fewer are given the opportunity to advance.

Good jobs are defined by the opportunity they offer to grow and advance. But too many are stuck in place, with no opportunity to grow and no ability to improve skills — like nursing aides and home health care workers, who make minimum wages and minimal benefits, and therefore move on to better paying jobs in other professions at the first opportunity. Government can help keep them in health care by providing tax credits for employers to provide job training and skill development, thereby fixing the broken step on the health care career ladder.

“We need to create more opportunities for training and development,” stated Bill Owens, CEO of Mercy Hospital and current Chairman of the American Hospital Association. “Our health care system needs more skilled workers, and it just makes sense to advance from within. Government help in tax credits for job training and skill development will help us address this critical problem we face as an industry and as a society.”

why if there is this need there, a program cannot be established.”

While the workforce competitiveness story was intended to apply the global economy to a specific job training need for entrants into the workforce, what drew readers’ attention was the opportunity that job training brings. Readers had some of the same reactions to this story as the nursing shortage story.

Like the nursing shortage story, readers support the concept of providing skills, i.e., opportunity, to workers. “I think most of the people, if they are not skilled they have the opportunity to get skills,” suggested one Hispanic woman. “The government is giving companies the opportunity to do that.” “They are fixing the education system because this person dropped out of school,” an African American man remarked. “He has no training. Now the government is stepping in and rehabilitating this person with experience of doing a particular job.” “That is going to have a long-term effect like these people are going to start paying taxes and being valuable assets to our workforce,” added one Hispanic man.

The narrowness of the proposal, and the requirement that business also make some commitment, are part of the appeal of this created example. “I think it is important because it is targeted,” an African American man suggested. “They are just giving these people money, these big businesses money which have been misappropriating this money in the first place; whereas, if they targeted for training of skilled laborers then it will have a benefit.” “It looks like there is give and take in this,” noted a Virginia man. “In return for the government funding of this, then a particular company would agree to do so and so.”

The weakness in the example is whether or not this kind of job training is really needed or just a handout for a corporation. “If they are able to tell what is going to be needed,” a Virginia woman suggested, “then they should identify and outline the skills that they are going to be needing, and that is what needs to be focused on, not how to work a cash register at Staples.” “Without some kind of assurance that unskilled people are getting skills,” one Hispanic man stated, “it just looks like we’re really subsidizing Staples who has to

provide this anyway if they want those employees.”

Importantly, opportunity works when it is communicated as a positive value to which everyone should have access. For example, advocates can discuss their work as ‘helping to provide opportunity.’ The opposite side of the value, trying to demonstrate that there is not opportunity, that the system is broken, is a very ineffective approach since it conflicts with what Americans believe to be true about this country. “I don’t

### **A Strong Foundation for the Workforce (Fictional News Tested in Focus Groups)**

The economy depends on a well-educated, well-trained workforce, but there is a shortage of skilled workers. Fixing the economy means starting with strengthening the foundation — basic job skills for entrants into the workforce. How can we provide the job skills people need to get in on the ground floor?

The Workforce Development Act was designed to do just that. It creates living wage jobs for low skilled workers by supporting employer-based job training programs for new or unskilled entrants into the workforce. “This program will allow us to strengthen the skills of the American workforce to be more competitive than ever,” stated state senator Bill Michaels. “Reports indicate that 60 percent of future jobs will require training that only 20 percent of present US workers possess. If we don’t offer job training for workers and fix the education system, the jobs will move to wherever the best-educated workforce is located in other countries. This program is a first step toward strengthening the foundation of the workforce.”

Under the Act, companies foot half the bill for customized training programs, in which businesses conduct their own training with government matching funds and guarantee employment to participants. And in order to be eligible for training, job seekers must show through an extensive assessment process that they lack the skills to find stable work on their own. One grant has been given to Staples, Inc. to fill positions for cashiers, merchandise stockers and copy-center assistants. In return for the government funding for Staples’ job training program, Staples will offer higher wages and better benefits than these positions typically receive — a minimum of \$6.75 per hour, and, for full-time employees, health benefits and the opportunity to participate in a retirement plan. The company also has agreed to aid workers in applying for the earned income tax credit.

A strong economy needs every person working to his or her fullest potential. By helping new entrants into the job market get the basic skills they need to work, we will be strengthening the country’s economic foundation.

think anyone is holding anybody back,” argued a Philadelphia man. “I think the opportunity is there. If you want it, you go out and get it. I also think that it is not up to the government or anybody else to create the opportunities. Opportunities are out there. You need to create them for yourself.”

### **Fairness**

In this created news article, the situation portrayed was one of basic fairness. Rather than profile an individual, it selected a job classification to profile. Focusing on work rather than the worker keeps the reader from blaming the individual for his or her situation. By positioning the minimum wage as equivalent to the 1970s, people readily see how unfair the wage is. Including health coverage as a

desired benefit further underscores the fairness value since people think that all people should have access to basic health care.

Fairness is a powerful value, and an effective frame for this situation. “Definitely, 100 percent true,” stated a Virginia woman. “It should provide fair wages and health benefits.” Added another, “I don’t know what minimum wage is right now, but \$5.15? What today costs what it did in the 1970s? And people scream whenever the government wants to raise the minimum wage but if you think about \$5.15 for an hour’s worth of work — very hard work, which janitorial work is obviously hard work, that’s crap. I mean what costs \$5? You can hardly purchase a fast food meal for \$5.” The statement “people who work shouldn’t be poor,” is about not having “economic slaves” as one Ohio man put it. “There is something wrong when a person is doing everything right and can’t make ends meet,”

stated a community leader. “We are all interconnected.”

They are particularly attracted to health care as a benefit to which all should have access. “The biggest thing that stood out for me is the basic health benefits,” a Virginia man described. “Far too many kids, families, single moms, single dads are unable to provide good quality healthcare to their children because of insurance companies, the for-profit hospitals.”

It causes some to question the “free market” system of setting wages. When one Hispanic woman defended the low-bid system, one of the men in the group challenged the humanity of that statement:

If there are two bidders, one is less than the other; you are going to go with the one that is more under your budget. So I don’t think companies should do certain things just because people need

## **Working with Dignity (Fictional News Tested in Focus Groups)**

People who work hard shouldn’t be poor, but today many are. The system is broken — millions of hard working Americans are living in poverty because many jobs that used to support a family in our parents’ generation now don’t pay enough to support one person. For example, full-time janitorial work in an office building used to provide decent wages, full benefits, and job security. It used to provide a father the opportunity to scrape together enough to send his children to school and a better life.

But now most janitors earn the minimum wage with few or no benefits. Instead of working hard to get ahead, low-wage workers are working hard and falling further and further behind. At \$5.15 an hour, the purchasing power of the minimum wage is 25% lower than it was in the 1970s. What today costs what it did in the 1970s? A parent with two children can work full-time year-round at the current minimum and still make only \$10,700, \$3400 less than the poverty threshold for a family of three. And that is with no benefits like health insurance or daycare subsidies. Living paycheck to paycheck means a family can be quickly plunged

into serious financial trouble through illness, layoff, or an unexpected expense.

Since the minimum wage has not been adjusted to keep up with inflation, wages have been forced lower than they were thirty years ago. “The only way we win a contract is by being the lowest cost bid,” noted Robert Matz, president of City Services, Inc., a contractor of janitorial services. “Building owners have to be willing to pay higher fees to set the wage floor higher for every contractor.”

And some building owners have stepped forward to do just that. A coalition of janitors and members of the community includes owners of 35 office buildings (20% of all office space in the metro area). They are asking City Hall to set a standard for living wages and basic health benefits for workers across the metropolitan area. “It is about basic fairness,” explained Father Frances of the Council of Churches. “A full-time job should provide the fair wages and health benefits that allow people to live with dignity and with enough financial security to provide their children with a better future.”

to support their families (Hispanic woman).

If you have a totally free market — if you just take the lowest bid possible, you are not going to provide even the minimal amount of salary is what it seems like. So the contractor wouldn't be able to be in business because the bids go to the lowest bidder. And at \$5.15 an hour, the thing is nothing. The whole premise is people who work hard shouldn't be poor. If you leave it to the lowest bidder, it is going to be below poverty for them, for janitors (Hispanic man).

Even so, many continue to look at the situation from the perspective of the employer. "If they raise the minimum wage," argued a Virginia woman, "this president of the company, he may have to shut down his business because he can't afford to pay his employees." They would rather not tamper with the market. "In a sense everybody is paid exactly right," suggested a Virginia man. "I think everybody deserves more but you get exactly what a market economy allows for a certain job level."

Furthermore, even with the emphasis on the job classification rather than the individual, people are still tempted to individualize the situation and wonder why this janitor doesn't improve his situation. "If he is not willing to pay him more than \$5.15 an hour," a Virginia woman stated, "then the janitor ought to — there are too many jobs like this that people can get. It's not like the area is flooded with people doing that kind of work." Another added, "But we're talking minimum-wage. Certainly he can replace what he has. He can flip burgers at McDonald's for minimum wage. He can always replace a minimum wage job."

Labor leaders who have confronted these kinds of perceptions in running

a living wage campaign based on fundamental fairness, emphasize the importance of having business executives and community leaders in the mix. "Having a few building owners taking the lead was critical to success," suggested one labor leader. "The political community and the religious community were very helpful as well. It was a strong argument to say 'here are folks who are hard working and important to community, but are also invisible and left behind.' Also, the math of a full-

### **The World Has Changed**

About two-thirds of women are now in the workforce but the workplace has not changed to adapt to families needs. The workplace still assumes the ideal worker has no other responsibilities except work. Life problems are to be kept out of the workplace. It doesn't matter if your child has the flu, or your mother needs surgery. You can be asked to work overtime or change your schedule with no thought of whether there is any impact on your home life. Seventy years ago this country created a basic set of work-related benefits for workers like unemployment insurance, Social Security, AFDC if the primary worker dies or leaves the family with no support, child labor laws and the 40 hour work week. These laws should be updated for the new century.

time job at minimum wage was also a pretty strong argument for change."

### **Balancing Work and Family**

Work family balance is a frequent topic for media coverage, office water cooler conversations and kitchen table conversations. In focus groups people frequently voice their concerns and their ideas for

reform. However, this approach also raises the conflict over women in the workplace and quickly becomes about personal choice and family values.

People frequently discuss the struggles they face balancing work and family and the ideas they have for how to address the problem. "Actually, my husband and I were just discussing this the other day," noted an Ohio woman, "that we felt corporate America should go down to a four day a week work week." "My job is flexible with work hours, so I can go in at 7 and leave at 3:30 with a half hour lunch," an Ohio woman shared. "So you have a flexible work schedule. Some places can't do it. But that is a benefit to a lot of parents."

Times are different now. People see less family time, and more work, compared to the past. "Things have changed," an Ohio man remarked, "your family has changed. I think everybody is expected to work more and longer hours now too. More people working longer hours. Less time for the family." "I think the word *balance* is a misnomer," an Ohio man professed, "because I don't think many families actually succeed in being balanced in doing what they think needs to be done. I think there is always a sense of having to do more for the company than you would like to do. When you look at all the trends, there is just less and less time for family life anymore. I think many workers are concerned that if they don't give more to the company, then they are not seen as team players."

However, people are also quick to make this issue about personal choice and values and reject government

“If you have to get up in the morning to go to work, you are in the middle-class. If you can’t make a living when you do get up in the morning to go to work, you are in the poor class.”

Ohio man

intervention. “I think it is the individual’s choice,” an Ohio woman remarked. “What is more important, your money or your children? And even if you have to work, there is some flexibility in the jobs that you work or job sharing or something else because I’ve seen what it is like to be on both sides of the fence and what children are like on both sides of the fence. I don’t think it’s for the government to tell us when we should be with our families.” Even dual income families feel guilty about their decision. “The children are going to be the ultimate ones that are hurt if both parents are working,” an Ohio woman confessed. “I would love to stay home, live off my husband’s income and pray to God that we are all going to survive and be happy.”

In an exercise designed to uncover hidden motivations, participants were asked to select a picture representing some aspect of work or low-wage workers. Some of the responses underscore how deeply people feel about the impact of work on children. It is about irresponsibility, and taps a deep sadness in people. One chose a picture of a baby hanging from a ceiling fan while the parents look in another direction. “The couple here, they look like they are corporate America,” an Ohio woman described. “She doesn’t work at McDonald’s and he doesn’t go around picking up trash, but all of these right here, these decorations on this wallpaper represent choices for their jobs for them to do. They can choose to have their babies swing around on the fan. Or they can choose to put their baby down here on the floor.” Another described a picture of “an empty playground. The reason it is empty is because mom is at work. The child is at a childcare center.” (See the Appendix for more descriptions.)

The problem, according to many, is desire for material things. An Ohio man suggested that people have become “slaves to Madison Avenue and what they tell us we need.” “If people wouldn’t try to keep up with the Joneses and try to consume and buy everything,” argued an Ohio man, “they wouldn’t have to be working 80 hours a week. It just depends on what you really believe is important to you. If you think buying a new car, a new boat and go on a vacation and being down there buying this, that and the other. Go work and don’t see your kids. Or, if they think the kids are more important than all those material objects you think are important because the neighbor has it; the guy across the street has it. It all depends on what you want to do.”

Grounding the work-family-balance conversation outside the family, and firmly in the public realm, helps people support political action. People have little understanding of how much government action has influenced their work lives. When reminded of current policies, they become more open to government intervention. “I think sick days, mandate companies to offer sick days and things like that,” an Ohio woman stated, “especially if you are a decent-sized company and can afford to pay your employees...Sick days are very important to people, whether you have kids or not. If you are not getting the paycheck, you are having a hard time covering bills. I think that is something that government can step into.” Another added, “I think government has to do those kind of things; otherwise companies won’t do them. The minimum wage and the amount of work time a week, I think government has to set those. We’ve learned that in the past because when they weren’t set, all the companies would work people to death.” “The laws need to reflect the fact that there

need to be built-in opportunities [for family time],” an Ohio man suggested. “I think the Clinton Administration did a lot in that regard by helping pass the Family Medical Leave Act. That has benefited a tremendous number of families that took time off, without pay, to care for a loved one. I think the statistics bear it out that it has been a success.”

### **The Disappearing Middle-class**

This approach tries to attach the plight of the working poor to the situation faced by the middle-class. It succeeds in reinforcing that the working poor and the middle-class share the same work ethic.

However, when the debate shifts to a conversation about solutions designed to lift the working poor, public opinion reverts to their assumptions about the poor. They believe the poor will always exist, and attempts to change that situation are inappropriate for a capitalist society.

People aren’t really sure what defines “middle-class.” Some point to dollar ranges like \$40–60,000 while others say the figure is now closer to \$100,000. Others are more comfortable thinking about the middle-class in lifestyle terms. “I think there is a better way to do it than putting the numbers on it,” suggested an Ohio man. “If you have to get up in the morning to go to work, you are in

## **The Disappearing Middle-class**



the middle-class. If you can't make a living when you do get up in the morning to go to work, you are in the poor class."

They worry that the service economy will lead to two classes. "That is the problem with a service economy," noted a Philadelphia man. "You are going to end up with poor and rich. There is going to be no middle-class." Some look at the fast pace of society and think the middle-class is already struggling for existence. "The middle-class is the one that has two people working, and they're just on this treadmill," an Ohio woman suggested. "This isn't what we think of as middle-class. We think of middle-class as sort

one hand it may help to transfer beliefs about the middle-class work ethic to the working poor. They are somewhat more likely to be viewed as working hard and trying to improve their circumstances. "What is poverty?" an Ohio woman asked. "I have one of the girls I was talking to that is a single mom. She works 40 hours a week. She picks up as much overtime as she can make. She makes \$12 an hour but between her rent, the food, the clothes, day care for her child which she gets a little bit of government support on that, she can barely make it. I can understand that. After putting all her expenses together, it is not a lot left for her and the little girl." However, under this

woman, "and not management, where the company will pick it up in the big corporate agencies. So while you may be getting a small pay increase, the health insurance is eating it alive to where the corporates are getting that pay increase and they are not having to up their health insurance." "I definitely agree," added another. "When you have executives making millions of dollars with stock options on top of it and then you have your trench workers not being compensated fairly, and I think compensation comes from more than just the pay check." "Let's face it," an Ohio woman stated. "They want to keep those high level employees because they are harder to hold onto, so they

## Enron, dot coms, etc., are not isolated cases; they are increasingly the norm.

of a comfortable level. I don't think that is true in this country anymore."

However others dispute this is occurring, and stress that "middle-class" today means a higher level of lifestyle than it meant in the past. "I think middle-class nowadays is a higher class than what middle class used to be," suggested an Ohio woman. "What we all take for granted nowadays, they didn't live that way, middle-class. You watch *Bewitched*, middle-class, *Bewitched*. No, we live a totally different lifestyle for the middle-class level nowadays. If you want to be middle-class level and you want to have this, and you want to have this...It starts taking away from family."

There are advantages and disadvantages in using the "disappearing middle-class" frame to describe the plight of low-wage workers. On the

frame, people continue to weigh an individual's worth. The problem is not systemic; it is inherent to the person. "It depends," an Ohio woman challenged. "I know people who work just to provide the clothes from the Gap. If there are two people in the household working, it depends. If you are single mom, God love them. I don't know how they do it."

When increasing the numbers of the working poor in low-paying service jobs is the cause of "the disappearing middle-class," focus group respondents continue to see the working poor as "the other." They may assign more work ethic to them, but it still does not bind them to the problem. However, when excessive corporate management is the cause of people slipping from the middle-class, people can identify. "Usually you see the health insurance go up for the lower-end employees," remarked an Ohio

do everything they can and basically give them whatever they want and the low end people who need it don't get it because there are so many of them basically. Anybody will take those jobs."

The distinction plays out more clearly when people debate ways to solve the problem. When people have a "working poor" mindset, they tend to view government intervention as inappropriate. "It's like the big brother society and everybody makes the same amount of money no matter what your education is," an Ohio woman argued, "no matter what you've done to get there. Are you saying the person at McDonald's should make the same as a physician? No." Added another, "I don't think some people should be handed certain things that — there has to be someone up here that started the company that's got the education, that has the experience. I

don't think the government should step in and say, 'all right Bobby Jo, you've been here for 10 years. You automatically get this and this and this' when they don't deserve it." "You are going to give all the benefits to this group and guess who is going to pay for it?" asked an Ohio woman. "The taxpayers."

When the political solutions are seen as being about addressing the needs of the working poor, focus group participants argue that intervention undermines a capitalist economy. "Capitalism versus socialism," accused an Ohio man. "Everything that is going on there, socialism, socialism, socialism. You are getting totally away

apply to business; which companies are responsible and long-term; what should all workers expect; what does the future hold? Though positioned as corporate responsibility, this discussion is really about the economy and society. "We can't measure the economy and society just in dollars," a community leader warns. "If that is the measure of success, you are maximizing that while there are others things that are valuable to our country. If we are just making more money, sometimes the other things lose."

Ohio man related. "I think they are probably surprised by the magnitude of it, but as far as it actually taking place I think everybody knew there was a dirty little secret in many large corporations in this country." "It is more than corporate greed," a community leader suggested. "It is part of the ramped up capitalism of the 1990s, the last part of the 20th century."

It wasn't always this way. Executives used to think beyond the immediate to plan for the long-term. "The higher-ups were more concerned with the overall welfare," suggested an Ohio man. "They were more – like Henry Ford, for instance, is a good example.

## Employers and workers used to go to the same churches and schools, but now employers are disengaged and no longer care.

from capitalism. Let's take care of them here. Let's give them this. Let's keep our jobs here. Get away from international business. Socialism. You are right in that. That is where everybody is heading towards. Everybody is following right into socialism. We're getting away from capitalism." "That means we all just throw it in a pot and everybody takes from it," argued another. "There will always be poor."

### **Corporate Responsibility vs. Corporate Greed**

This approach takes the conversation to a higher level. Rather than talk about one workforce segment, it questions the foundation of the economy: why should business exist, to what end; what should motivate business; what should our society stand for; what rules should

Enron reminded people of a shift they have begun to see in corporate America toward a culture of greed. What they characterize as "grab and go" companies includes dot coms, the savings and loan scandals, etc. "I think it is a culture of greed," an Ohio man stated. "It is a corporate culture of greed that has really been where I think for too many years, mainly throughout the 90s, was really edified in this country as being something that you should aspire to. Get as much money as you can, as quickly as you can, with whatever tricks you can, and the politicians will turn a blind eye." Another added, "I think society is actually breeding instant gratification. Get it now and get it as quick as you can, as much as you can and get out. I don't think they are there for the long run."

Enron, dot coms, etc., are not isolated cases; they are increasingly the norm. "I think nobody is surprised by it," an

In the middle of the Depression, he doubled everybody's wages to build him and his company up. But he didn't do it by figuring out 'well, I can take all my troops, cut their wages in half. Make twice as much for myself. Sell the thing off as a spinoff. Finance it through Enron or whatever and go.' The whole attitude was different. I'm going to build a company with me." Another added, "You wanted that to be there later."

Some believe part of the problem stems from management being increasingly removed from employees. It is easier to make tough decisions when a person is only a line item on a budget. "There's been a decade or two where the executives in the corporations have abandoned any affinity with the people that make the money down in the streets, the troops," an Ohio man argued. "It's how much can we manipulate everything to steal everything from everybody else and

## Public anger with corporate greed is not only about wage disparities. It is about irresponsibility, immorality and selfishness.

line our pockets.” Labor leaders echo this concern: “Employers are different today than they were 30 years ago. Employers used to be much more engaged in the social life of the community. Today employers are frequently not present at all. Fewer have a commitment to the social and economic well-being of the people. Employers and workers used to go to the same churches and schools, but now employers are disengaged and no longer care.”

Grab-and-go companies do not make good employers. Their perspective is “tell your people what they want to hear. Get what you can out of them.’ They are going to use their employees. They are going to use their people that they are providing a service or product to. You are going to get what you can get, not only out of your employees but also out of the people you are doing business with. It’s a very self-centered, narrow scope — we’re going to get ours. To the rest be damned.” It is shortsighted and disloyal. “You are making millions because you are selling yours off on the side but yet you are encouraging me to put everything into that 401K there,” an Ohio man explained, “then there is no loyalty there.” “So you might have some employers who might try to run their employees noses into the ground,” an Ohio woman remarked. “Work, work, work — you were 16.5 minutes; you are a minute and a half late from break.” “Then they come in and slash jobs all over the place to make the year-end book look good,” an Ohio woman stated. “For some businesses the relationship with the employee begins at the gate,” remarked a business leader. “The employer doesn’t want to get involved. That was the right decision years ago, but not now. We need to address workers’ needs and satisfy more than the wage issue.”

This relationship leads to insecurity, which people have been particularly sensitive to since 9/11: “You have to learn to live in an unstable, insecure environment and that is the era that we’re living in,” suggested a Philadelphia man. “It’s like the 11th. I don’t like the feeling that happened on the 11th, but it is not stopping me...and I think the job that I have is no longer stable...I don’t know if it is going to happen tomorrow. I don’t like thinking that way. I’d like to think it would last forever, but I know that is just not the way anymore.” Some employers recognize their employees’ feelings of insecurity since the recession and 9/11. “People are scared,” a business leader commented. “When I talk about changes, everybody freaks out. Even with my reassurances, they all still doubt their jobs.”

Just as importantly, grab-and-go companies are not able to accomplish the kind of achievements that made this country great. One participant used a picture of a steam locomotive on a trestle to describe corporate America’s failings. “A company can’t build this type of an enterprise today because it would take five years to put it together at a minimum and all we want to do now is sit there and play games and juggle things around, and what can I show as a phony or a real profit for next quarter?” an Ohio man explained. “You can’t build an inter-continental rail system today because they don’t have the attention span.” (For more descriptions see the Appendix.)

The solution, according to focus group participants, is to replace the short-term profit-at-all-cost mindset with a long-term view. “Maybe they ought to focus less on the dollar sign at the top and more for the aggregate of the whole company,” an Ohio man suggested. Strong solid companies are

those that promote teamwork throughout the company. Pointing to a picture of a flock of flying birds, one participant suggested, “Everyone flocks together. If you work together, you succeed. If you work together, you are a team. Teamwork, teamwork, teamwork.” One CEO promotes teamwork by sharing information: “In our organization everybody knows our financial status. They know where our work has to be and where it is. I want everybody to be as aware as I am. I need everyone to worry about the business and think about ideas. It is part of being a professional and being an adult.” Another added the priority of keeping employees satisfied: “The growth of our company is based on being able to grow and retain our workforce.”

Small actions demonstrate that an employer respects workers. “My brother-in-law’s company just started doing birthdays off,” stated an Ohio woman. “You get your birthday off. So that just adds to that little extra teamwork.” Another added, “I like to have a day off more than having an overtime paycheck because it is more important to me.” One small business owner related that her business success was due to her ability to reward her employees: “The number one thing was keeping the employees happy. Not keeping them happy but just making sure that they were paid well, that we took them on buying trips. If you have a happy employee, you have a happy business.”

Public anger with corporate greed is not only about wage disparities; it is about irresponsibility, immorality and selfishness. “It’s okay to make money in the United States as long as you make it honestly and you are not taking advantage of somebody else,” noted an Ohio woman. “I think it is okay that somebody has a nice house but by golly they’d better be doing

# The Challenge of Government Intervention

something on the side to help somebody else, in my opinion.” Another added, “I don’t think necessarily that people make too much money. I think if they are rewarded for work that is fine. But I think greed in this case to me means what would have motivated those legal firms and accounting firms to keep their mouths shut.”

When focus group participants are in a corporate responsibility mindset, they have a series of expectations for a good employer: flexibility in schedule and benefits, employee decision-making, equalizing benefits across the company, fair wages and benefits, and respect. They don’t believe that these changes will happen “out of the altruistic means of their heart.” Even so, they do not want mandates. “I think companies should be rewarded,” suggested an Ohio woman. “They are either going to do it if they have tax benefits...so it is a win/win. It’s going to be a win for the families. It’s going to be a win for the company.”

A corporate responsibility conversation is about the economy and the kind of society we want to have. In that regard, it does not set low-wage workers apart from the economy, they are integral to it. It also becomes about a capitalist and democratic society and what that means. “There are things we have to do as a society that gives people a solid base that includes things like health care, and libraries and things that we can proudly say make our country better than others,” a community leader expressed. “That helps us create the kind of equality of citizenry that we need.”

One of the most difficult challenges advocates face is making these issues public, rather than private, responsibility. As we have seen throughout this analysis, the public puts responsibility on individuals to be solely responsible for their own problems. The reader/listener is looking for any cue that allows them to place the blame for the situation on the individual, removing the situation from public discourse. Even when a solution is clearly in the

public arena, people continue to be reluctant. They see government as ineffective, believe government tries to get too involved in people’s lives, and worry that their tax dollars are supporting everybody else. Finally, the public’s perception of the “free market” is a barrier for any regulation of business or government intervention in the economy.

It is particularly difficult to convince the public to support government policy on behalf of the poor. Any effort to do so reminds people of everything that is wrong with welfare. “We have welfare,” stated a Philadelphia woman. “We have food stamps. We’ve got WIC. We’re giving, we’re giving and we’re giving and they don’t really do anything for it.” Another added, “I don’t understand why they give people welfare and don’t make them work for it.” “If you are in a dead end job, you don’t know you are in a dead end job?” asked a Philadelphia man. “It’s your problem.”

They are skeptical about government’s ability to do anything right. “Whenever the government gets in something it never solves the problem,” complained an Ohio man. “It’s like the War on Poverty. Why didn’t we win it 10, 20, 30, 40 years ago, and if we haven’t won it why haven’t we thrown in the towel? You start a government program and it will never quit. It’s not likely to be effective.” Additionally, they believe government has reached too far into areas that it should not – to the point of paranoia for some. “The government,” suggested an Ohio woman, “there is places now that have those cams everywhere where they can watch everything we do.”

## Discussion Among Virginia Women

Why are we uncomfortable with government intervention?

*It seems like they spend a lot of money and don’t do very much.*

*We see communism lurking.*

*We have too many . . .*

*They are already dictating where we go for our healthcare.*

*Exactly.*

*I had cancer eight years ago. I can’t be seen by my doctor who diagnosed me. I think that is ludicrous.*

Is the government saying that, or the health insurance?

*Health insurance.*

*I’m sure that the government has some kind of a role play in this, whether or not they want to admit it. But decisions like this aren’t made purely by one hospital to another or a doctor to a doctor or insurance company. Somebody has an upper hand in this.*

Even so, most still look to government for solutions, though they are skeptical of specific policy proposals. “When the rich get richer and the poor get poorer,” noted a Philadelphia man, “the only thing that helps is government because they can step in as an independent factor and say ‘wait a minute.’ Rich guy, you’ve got to pay something to the poor guy and the poor guy, you are going to have to work harder.” “It completely bugs me that we tend to focus government incentives on those who have already got money and got jobs,” argued a community leader. “I don’t think people want hand outs, they want meaningful work and there is lots of meaningful work that doesn’t involve star wars defense.”

They believe enough programs exist; but people do not hear about them. “It’s the nasty secrets of the government,” stated a Philadelphia man. “They have the programs but who knows about them? How do you find out about them? Does Sal come up to you and say ‘hey, you know you can get this program?’” Another agreed, “It’s very simple to find out, if you want to. If you have the interest, you can find out.” According to a Philadelphia man, there are “programs there but if the people don’t want to take advantage of these programs for one reason or another — maybe they are lazy; maybe they don’t know about them, whatever — it is not going to work.”

One business leader thinks the solution to effective government policy lies with familiarizing legislators: “I would encourage legislators to spend some time in some of these shelters and in the government programs to see what the true priorities in America need to be. I think they are blind to it – absolutely. If you are in Congress you don’t have these worries unless you are using an

illegal immigrant to watch your children. Millionaires are telling those on minimum wage what their lives should be.” Another believes the answer lies with business: “Government is too removed to come up with solutions that will work. We need to bring the solutions, government can help fund them.”

Activists’ biggest concern is the current political environment for advancing these issues. “Policymakers put it on the back burner,” one community leader complained. “It is unpopular with big income producers, the power people who tend to control legislatures around the



country. At the national level, business people still have the power to control. Enron is the tip of the iceberg. Now we are concentrating on an issue that puts all domestic programs on back burners. I have a problem with that. We are fighting an enemy we don’t even know, putting trillions into the war.”

Shifting resources to the local level is the solution that some suggest. “City funding makes a bigger difference than anything else,” noted one community leader. The closer you get to the people, transportation, hospitals, the bigger difference it

makes. Federal and state help is as much about philosophy as results. But city and county government don’t have the option of philosophy; they have indigents on the streets to deal with.”

## Specific Policy Solutions

Survey data suggests the public supports a variety of policies to address the struggles of the working poor. However, digging beneath the surface of opinion demonstrates that public support for some solutions is weak and can be shifted with a powerful opposition message. The prior sections on opinion toward low-wage workers and the economic system illustrate the attitudinal barriers to supporting some of the proposed policies. Framing these issues appropriately will be key to their success.

## Education and Job Training

Focus group participants, community activists, business executives, and union executives all emphasize the importance of education and job training in improving conditions for society and low-wage workers. It is about opportunity. “Education is the great leveler in society,” one community leader expressed. “If a waitress just waits and doesn’t go to school or anything and advance her education,” stated an African American man, “she’ll continue to wait tables. But if she educates herself and gets managerial skills, she has the opportunity because she knows the particular company from the ground up.” “I think it is more important that the employee have the opportunity for additional job training and skill developments,” remarked a Philadelphia man. “Higher wages will come after

job training and skill development takes place.”

Parents worry that without a solid college education, there will be no decent jobs in the future. “My kids have to go to college,” a Philadelphia woman worried. “I have a child I know who will never make it in college, and I think, ‘Oh my God, what is she going to do?’ It used to be you could do things, but she has got to be an educated street sweeper. There are no jobs like that.” Another agreed, “There are no dummy jobs anymore. You’ve got to be computer wise.”

For the most part, people support additional emphasis on education

### ***Minimum Wage and Living Wage***

As outlined in the first report sponsored by this project, “Achieving the American Dream: A Meta-Analysis of Public Opinion Concerning Poverty, Upward Mobility, and Related Issues,” surveys demonstrate high levels of support for increasing the minimum wage. At the same time, surveys also demonstrate low public priority for this issue and a desire to make the minimum wage a state responsibility rather than the federal government’s responsibility. Qualitative research, like focus groups and in-depth interviews, offers an opportunity to explore how people think through these issues, and uncover the conflicts

complained. “It’s hard to make ends meet.” A few see it as a way to stimulate a community’s economy. “The minimum wage goes up,” explained an African American man, “people have more money to spend. It will go back to the economy, especially these types of stores right in the community.”

Underneath the public’s desire to assist the working poor is a series of concerns about increasing the minimum wage. One barrier to support for increasing the minimum wage is that focus group participants believe the effect of increasing the minimum wage is “everything goes up.” “It raises the price of milk,” noted

“The minimum wage isn’t liveable. It’s hard to make ends meet.”

Ohio woman

and job training. However, one common barrier to public support for education and job training is that they believe opportunity for this already exists. “There is every opportunity given to kids to better themselves,” argued a Philadelphia man. “Every school has it. I work for the Department of Education. I know about it. If they want to, it’s there.”

At least some community leaders think job training is too limited. “There are some people who can be entrepreneurial, but job training doesn’t help with that,” noted a community leader. “That option is not available to let people go out on their own. Instead it is ‘How do we clean them up for somebody else?’ A lot of it is about being on time and wearing the right clothes and falling in line, not about providing landscaping services or how to do a translating service. Wealth creation is the way out of serfdom.”

in opinion that frequently go unnoticed in close-ended surveys. Indeed, this research discovered new insights concerning people’s inner conflicts about increasing the minimum wage. By understanding these areas of weakness in public support, advocates can craft messages to immunize the public from the opposition’s strongest messages.

Unframed, many focus group participants raise some resistance to increasing the minimum wage or instituting living wages. However, when framed as fairness or corporate responsibility, people who were opposed shift toward support. The motivation is basic fairness to workers. “We’re talking about people who work,” remarked an Ohio woman. “We’re talking about somebody who maintains a job and who works. Should they be on the poverty level of this country?” “The minimum wage isn’t livable,” an Ohio woman

a Virginia woman. Another agreed, “Right. It just seems like everything goes up. It seems like you stay where you are regardless.” Business executives believe that they are unable to increase wages because it would inflate costs: “because of the demands of the customers, we can’t pay just any wage. There is only so much people will pay for food products, hotel rooms, etc., and wages are a big part of the cost, and subject to competitive pressure and consumer demands.”

To a certain extent, they accept business’s contention that increasing the minimum wage costs jobs. “I think if they raise the minimum wage,” stated one Hispanic woman, “people would lose the jobs because the contractor will have to pay more to them. What they will do is lay off some people and just make the other

“The average worker also has major health care, child care, personal infrastructure issues.”

a community leader

person work twice as hard. Pay them a little bit more but instead of doing one person’s job, that person would be responsible for doing two persons’ job now for a dollar more.” “It’s a little hard to pay a guy if you own a small business say \$8 an hour when you are not pulling in that much business a year,” noted an Ohio man. The reality, according to a labor leader, is that “no economist is saying this is going to put people out of work. The dollars are too low. But it doesn’t take much to make a huge difference for low-wage workers. An extra \$2/hr. makes a huge difference.”

The image of a minimum wage job, outlined earlier in the report, as service sector jobs held by teens, stands in the way of supporting an increase. “I like the idea of the minimum wage thing,” an Ohio man stated, “but I’ve always had a problem with a lot of the service industries. It’s hard to say that the kid standing behind the register at McDonald’s...I’m sure there is not a lot of skill to taking a burger from here and sticking it in a bag and getting \$8 and then bitching about the fact that God, I’ve been here 2 hours and I’m here for 2 more hours.” Business leaders also emphasize that minimum wage jobs are transitional jobs. “These are transition jobs,” explained one business leader. “If you have more skills, you earn more money.”

Most are unfamiliar with the term “living wage.” When exposed to the concept in the “Working With Dignity Article,” participants could understand how an increase for an occupational group could be shared across an industry. “The labor contractors themselves will all be in the same situation,” explained one Hispanic man. “The companies will all have a minimum floor raised equally, and so nobody is at a competitive disadvan-

tage.” Indeed, according to one labor leader, this is why the living wage campaigns have been successful. “Setting a standard that everyone is beholden to,” suggested one labor leader, “then employers are less adamant about fighting it, because everyone is paying it. That is how the market is driven; everyone is paying at that level. So if you can organize a market, you have the advantage that it is capitalism at work, rather than public policy. It argues for the community-wide approach. Without that, it is a difficult battle.”

### **Unionization**

Union executives note that organizing is the long-term solution to address the needs of low-wage workers. “We believe if a larger percentage of those industries were organized,” one labor leader shared, “they would be better off. So we put a lot of energy into that. The results show that those areas that are more organized, the pay and benefits have improved dramatically.”

But most labor leaders also do not believe unions can win alone. Community support is critical. “In terms of successfully winning these campaigns,” remarked a labor leader, “we can’t do it alone. There is so much employer opposition that it takes a common understanding of low-wage workers to craft a strategy that is successful in winning better wages and working conditions. It is important to recognize that common interest and understand that union, religious, community need each other to win the fight.”

On this topic, they and the public are in opposite corners. The public sees unions as the problem, not the solution. They are, at best, outdated. “There was a time when you needed it. The union was the only answer,” remarked an Ohio man. “There are

unions that did some wonderful things for people because they were getting the shaft. But I think, just like technology, people are advanced more now and I don’t think like our government is going to let a lot of that happen.” Instead of seeing unions as offering opportunity, they limit advancement to a seniority system. “A union that is going to hold the go-getter back because we’re all in a number here,” stated an Ohio man. “You are 1; I’m 2 on down. New position opens up. You are much better qualified than anyone of us here. He gets the job.”

The public and business leaders share perspectives on unions. According to one business leader, “40% of airline expenses are wage-related costs. Anything the airlines do, the labor demands make or break the airlines. The auto industry is heavily labor intensive and the cost of labor is a huge part of expense. Plant selection is based on the availability and affordability of labor, which is a new phenomenon.”

Focus group participants believe unions create a worker vs. management dynamic and increase labor costs to the extent that manufacturers go overseas. “It creates an us-and-them mentality with management versus the occupational,” argued an Ohio man. Labor leaders recognize that this is a pervasive perception, but some are increasingly working with business to address problems (though many unions remain fervently anti-business). “Typically a strike is union vs. corporations,” one labor leader commented, “and most Americans think that is a fair fight. Our message was delivered by the workers and their families and what they were trying to achieve. It was a powerful message, but the key in each community was business, political and religious leaders behind it as well.”

## **Race and Immigration**

Images of low-wage workers are racially based, with most thinking of minorities as holding low-wage jobs. Immigration policy is an important area for unions and business. “From the standpoint of both the workplace and their legal rights,” noted one labor leader, “we have taken a firm view of proposing a stronger legalization program for immigrants.” “Over the past 20 years, the service industry is increasingly foreign born workers. American workers reject that type of work, because of the difficulty of the work and low wages. That creates a series of issues – INS, culture, schools, the transient nature of the work, and employers are struggling to deal with this.”

On the one hand, anti-immigrant sentiment is particularly high right now. In times of economic recession, Americans do not want to see jobs go to outsiders. “They are bringing all these foreign experts in the sciences,” complained a Philadelphia woman, “and our guys, there are no jobs for them. They let all these people come in and take because our people just don’t get enough education.” “It is a reality these jobs will be filled by foreign workers,” noted one business leader. “The U.S.-born workforce is not interested in these jobs.” “The people that are in those colleges are Oriental,” stated one California Latina. “To me, 75 percent of those people are Oriental, so a lot of foreign people are coming into the United States. They are taking advantage of what the government has to offer them because they don’t have it in their countries. They are coming here. They are getting a free education, and they are making money when our kids should be the ones actually taking advantage of the situation.”

At the same time, they recognize that immigrants are willing to take the jobs Americans do not want at wages they would refuse. “There were no Americans working on the cruise ship,” remembered a Philadelphia man. “I asked, ‘why are you working here because you are making \$50 a week or some crazy thing.’ They are sending it back home because that is a lot of money to them. It’s like to us, \$50 doesn’t mean anything anymore. They are happy waiting on tables, making their \$20 and I don’t think anybody in this country would be

**“It is unconscionable that you have someone working for you who can’t go to the doctor because they don’t have health insurance.”**

a labor leader

happy making that type of money and could live on it. Plus, there is always a welfare system or somebody to support you so why do it?” “Who wants to pick the strawberries?” asked a Philadelphia man. Answered another, “That’s right. I think that is exactly why there are foreign immigrants.”

To combat negative perceptions and encourage the image of immigrants as taxpayers and future citizens, labor has empowered immigrants to speak on their own behalf. In one living wage campaign “almost all these folks were immigrants, many illegal,” noted a labor leader. “That campaign dramatically improved the public’s perception of the virtuous immigrant. He has a job, raises a family, pays taxes...that was the vision for this

group of folks which would help them eventually reach legal status.”

Beyond the specific policy implications is an underlying concern about racial equality in society, particularly among advocates. “I think the problem that faces African Americans still is a subtle form of discriminatory practices,” noted one community leader. “Gone are the days when they don’t hire any blacks. It is much more subtle today, and I don’t know how to erase that in employers’ minds.

Educational disparities are a key concern, because education is seen as the path to opportunity. “The level of education in the black community is not what it should be,” a community leader stated. “It is not equal to the white community. The black community can’t take higher education for granted. We have to nurture our kids, give them extra training to see that they get to that level so they can enter into the colleges and universities.”

These disparities should be a concern for society because, according to one community leader, “You build community with a lack of resentment and competition among different classes, communities, and minorities, when everyone participates in that community as a whole. Social resentment is cancerous and not the world you want to send your kids out in.” “If you forget the guy down at the lower rung, he will become angrier and angrier,” one community leader warned. “If we continue this way, we are primed for a French revolution.”

## **Worklife Issues**

Business executives emphasize that workplace concerns are about more than wages. “The real answer is they need to be recognized as individuals,” explained one business executive.



“They want to be treated with dignity and don’t want to be taken advantage of. Those that are successful are those that recognize and respect their workforce. For example, our Central American workers want to go home for the holidays. They come for the jobs, not to be Americans. They want to go home for the holidays. Normally they quit, go home, and then get a new job in January. So now a lot of companies are closing down for the holidays.”

Focus group participants would agree to a certain extent. They are very concerned about quality affordable health care, and do not understand why this is still such a worry in America. “Let every man, woman and child in America have healthcare,” demanded an Ohio man, a sentiment that was voiced in every focus group. Unions have also seen the power of health benefits as an issue for communications. “I think it becomes economic justice,” stated one labor leader. “It is unconscionable that you have someone working for you who can’t go to the doctor because they don’t have health insurance.” Business leaders are struggling with the answers. “There is some need for intervention on health care costs,” suggested one business leader. “I don’t know the right answer. It is continuing to rise and each increase gets a little tougher to absorb.”

While they would rather parents stay home with children, they recognize the worry and expense of child care and support efforts to provide assistance. “The cost for childcare is astronomical,” suggested one community leader. The types of pressures we are putting on these fragile families is enormous.” “The average worker also has major health care, child care, personal infrastructure issues,” stated a community leader. “How you create stability in

your life is shaky. It hurts people’s ability to advance.”

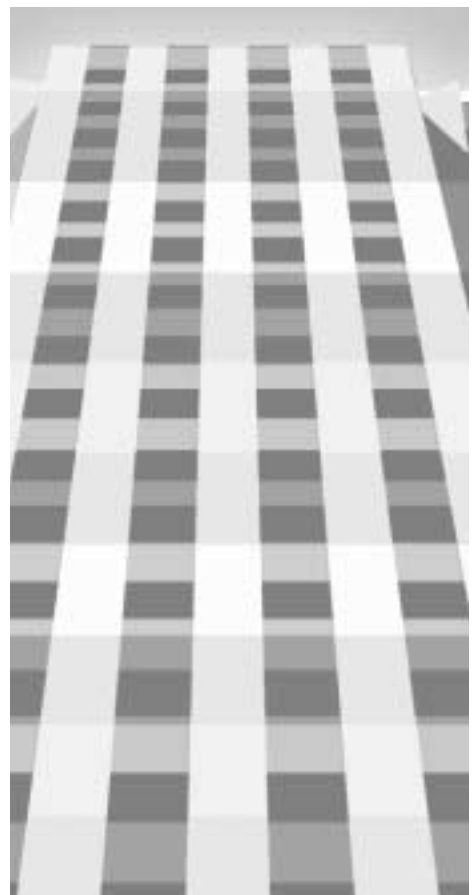
An ability to advance if they work hard is an important criterion in a good job. “When you feel comfortable and you feel that if you work hard, you can get ahead,” suggested a Philadelphia woman. But low-wage workers have the least opportunity to advance since, according to one labor leader, “the employer feels like there is a labor supply that says they don’t need to provide advancement or people don’t stick with them long enough.” Paid leave, flexibility, respect, are the simple workplace changes that would help them in their daily lives.

Housing and transportation are issues that community and business leaders frequently mention. “We have a huge affordable housing issue,” noted one community leader. “It is impossible for a family of 3 in poverty to get housing. The vacancy rates are only 1–2% and you need 5–7% vacancy rate to be competitive. Also, the jobs aren’t in low-income communities, so you have to be able to get transit to suburbs where the jobs are.”

Business executives have traditionally tried to keep work and home very separate, but this is changing. “The same transition that happened at schools is happening with employers,” explained one business leader. “Schools started to have to deal with problems outside their expertise — drugs, pregnancy, family issues, etc. Now employers are starting to have to deal with those problems and they don’t know how to do it or what to do about it.” “Funding ESL, working with school districts, housing, transportation,” listed one business leader, “employers are now getting involved in these things. Not because of social investment, but because it is a business investment. Business didn’t

used to get involved in personal lives, but we can’t ignore it now. We walk a fine line of not interfering, but trying to give assistance to help them and help the company.”

Retaining good employees is a challenge in a strong economy and has forced businesses to creatively address some of these issues. “The economics of our business prohibit us from paying \$20,000 a year,” explained one business leader. “So we have creative ways of retaining employees. We have flex employees that set their own hours, a GED program, opportunity for advancement, and a program called Pay Plus, where our longer term employees can set aside money that we match for needs like transportation, etc. In an industry that experiences a lot of turnover, we have some employees with us for 5 or 6 years.”



# Conclusions

Current news coverage of low-wage work attempts to create sympathy by profiling individual workers and their struggles. The research suggests this approach is ineffective, because the reader then assigns responsibility for fixing the situation to the very person profiled. Instead, communications needs to make work the focus of attention, not the individual. Several of the fictional news stories reported here are examples of shifting to a work-related conversation — a citywide living wage campaign for janitors, a nursing shortage, a job-training program. These stories still make low-wage workers visible, but in a way that highlights the system and the situation, not the perceived flaws of the individual.

Furthermore, communications needs to be instilled with core values such as opportunity, fairness, or responsibility. Without first cuing these core values, people default to their existing assumptions that low-wage workers are unskilled and unmotivated, and government policies are merely handouts. At this point in the research, it seems these core values should be approached from the

positive. For example, people do not believe there is a lack of opportunity in America, but they support efforts to ensure opportunity or to help provide opportunity.

Support for some of the policies we seek to advance is actually much more tenuous than most survey data would suggest — the opposition has several strong messages that can depress public support for these issues. This is due to the public's model of how the economy works — the economy is a force of nature that should be left "free." So while they would like to see people earn more than the minimum wage, they see efforts to increase the minimum wage as representing an unnatural tinkering with the economy. In the short-term, this argues for highly controlled, values-based communications to advance specific policies. For lasting change, advocates need to understand the connections between low-wage work and a variety of other beliefs, and to shift the definition of the economy toward a man-made model that requires responsible management.

Finally, we need to see low-wage work not as one isolated issue, but one that taps a variety of fundamental belief systems — how we think about work, family, the economy, skill, capitalism,

what it means to be American, government intervention, to name only a few. While individual policies can be advanced with values-based frames such as opportunity, fairness, and responsibility, these gains are likely to be hard-fought and short-lived unless a concerted effort is undertaken to introduce a new, systematic way of thinking about society and the economy. The public's way of understanding the economy — that it is a force of nature outside human control — is a barrier to building support for government intervention. It needs to be replaced with a model of the economy that defines the economy as man-made, controllable, and requiring responsible stewardship, vision and direction.

Similarly, the tiered, or competitive nature of class and the economy is problematic. If one has to climb the economic ladder to be successful, it means there is always someone at the bottom of the ladder waiting to climb. This kind of thinking is an impediment to valuing all sectors of society for their contribution to an economy that benefits us all. A recommendation for a new system of thought is outside the scope of this report, but is an effort that needs further attention and investigation.

The public's way of understanding the economy — that it is a force of nature outside human control — is a barrier to building support for government intervention.

# Appendix — Images of the Poor

## **Participants selected images that symbolize low-wage work:**

### [Jars lined up on a shelf]

I think the main employers look at many low-skilled workers as being probably company liabilities, and I think many of them require a drug test before the employment. I think this is how many companies see their employees, first of all, whether they passed the drug test or not. I think there is a certain sense of paranoia. If they don't pass the drug test, they are basically — they have to have some assurance that the employees that they are taking on are not drug dependent so they are potential liabilities.

### [Nicely dressed people]

They all wear the same uniform with the same tag on it. They spend so much of their money to look like this picture. They are out there trying to buy the Tommy Hilfiger jeans and all that kind of stuff so they look just like the upper-or even middle-class people. But we all see them — when you say the word “janitor”, people go, “I know some janitors make some good money.”

### [Row houses]

I picked out the apartments. I'm envisioning not necessarily a nice three story but just kind of a row house type of place where everybody is trucking in it at 5 o'clock at night, leaving at 8 o'clock in the morning. Everybody hauling in, hauling out. Trying to keep your yard looking nice but they hit their pinnacle. They are in an apartment; they are not going to have a house. They are just hoping to God they are going to stay.

### [A shadow of a person]

It's not a real person; it's just a shadow. This person can go and another shadow will come. You don't even see the person at all. This the job. It's always going to be there, but the person is never going to — you are never going to pick out the person as this job. It's a shadow.

### [Train on trestle]

This to me is a train. This is a worker. A train is there. It works hard. You never really see it. They are just there. A hard worker and maybe even sometimes their jobs are dangerous. They are not well paid. People are really grateful for them. I think we are all much more thankful for firemen now after 9/11 because they got some press. We can see. They always were here. We just didn't appreciate them and the same with workers that are paid minimum wage. We're very thankful for them.

### [Train on trestle]

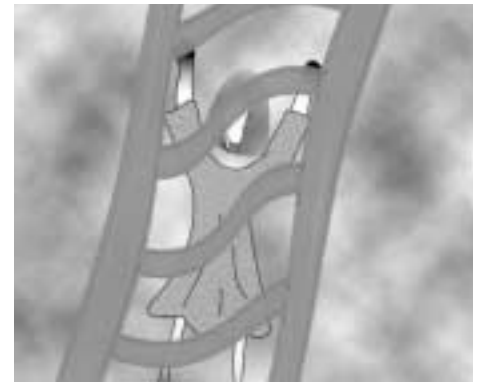
The train is basically like your big guys up there that get paid a lot of money. The support that is underneath, the track, are your minimum wage people.

### [Sailboat]

The boat and sailing. You might be going along what you think is smooth waters, but boy you never know when the rough ones are coming. They are not far behind.

### [Flowers]

Yes, because the people who pick these are paid very low wages. They usually don't even live in a house. They are shipped off and they are sold for tons of money. Tomorrow, there will be people all over the country getting deliveries of flowers that



somebody spent 15 hours three days before for a nickel working for 18-hour days or something.

### [Baby flying on a ceiling fan while the parents look in another direction]

The couple here, they look like they are corporate America. She doesn't work at McDonald's and he doesn't go around picking up trash, but all of these right here, these decorations on this wallpaper represent choices for their jobs for them to do. They can choose to have their babies swing around on the fan. Or they can choose to put their baby down here on the floor.

### [View of skyscraper at night]

This is the big building and it says, “Hi, I'm the corporation.” All of these lights are struggling to get into this corporation. However, America is built on a dream, so they are all dreaming to get into this building. Each and every one of us had the opportunity to get in this building. We just have to know how to get there.

### [Playground]

This is an empty playground. The reason it is empty is because mom is at work. The child is at a childcare center.

# Images of Corporate America

*Participants selected images that symbolize the good side and the bad side of Corporate America:*

[Woman looking out from under a VW bug]

Let's face it, we're women. This is sometimes how I feel in bad corporate America because we get run over a lot. Men get paid more than women; men have advantages. They'll take a man over a woman; women will do demeaning work. "Oh you know somebody messed up the bathroom. Do you think you could go over there?" Or, "I don't know where a pen is. Do you know where a pen is?"

[SUV in snow]

Oh here, good America. Corporate America, nice, safe Land Rover. Good, safe. It's snowy. The kids are in the car. It's bad out. This company is wondering about our safety and they gave us something good that we're going to — I don't know anything about the brand, but I'm just saying this is a good picture of corporate America because they are looking out for us.

[Woman in shadow with a spotlight on one eye]

I pictured it as her peeking. Her spying on employees but always knowing what is going on and not trusting.

[Woman in shadow with a spotlight on one eye]

Who is that? What do they want? What are they doing? They are looking out. Every one of us is going to have a different way of interpreting whether that is a man's eye or a woman's eye behind the mask. That's just what corporate America is. It's

hiding in a back room somewhere like the mirror.

[Flock of birds flying]

This one I would like to view as everyone flocks together. If you work together, you succeed. If you work together, you are a team. Teamwork, teamwork, teamwork.

[Flock of birds flying]

It looks like they are taking off or maybe landing. But they are all able to do this in a very tight formation. You may bump into each other; we're still going to take off. We're still going to go. You are still going to move forward.

[Volleyball game]

In order to get that ball over that net, you need — well, you can do it by yourself but teamwork helps. There has got to be somebody at the top of the net to send the ball over. There has to be somebody at the top and somebody down low.

[An old boat]

If you don't treat your employees right and if you don't have a good product and if you are trying to screw people over, then you will be like this little boat — out. Nobody in it. All dried up, washed ashore.

[Three leaves artistically displayed on a plate]

It shows some diversity; different forms all fitting together in a pattern. It's interesting, the small leaf is up front and center. It is not being overshadowed by the larger leaves, and I think that is a nice symbolism about

companies that care about the little guy in the company. The little guy is up front and center. Oftentimes they are what make things work.

[Baby flying on a ceiling fan while the parents look in another direction]

This one just screamed to me the bad of corporate. How it is tearing our families. Having to put job in front of family and the balance. I think good companies really work for a work/life family balance.

[Woman on a hammock]

She's maybe spent her life and has been a well taken care of employee, and has paid her dues and now gets to reap those benefits.

[Thanksgiving table with pumpkins]

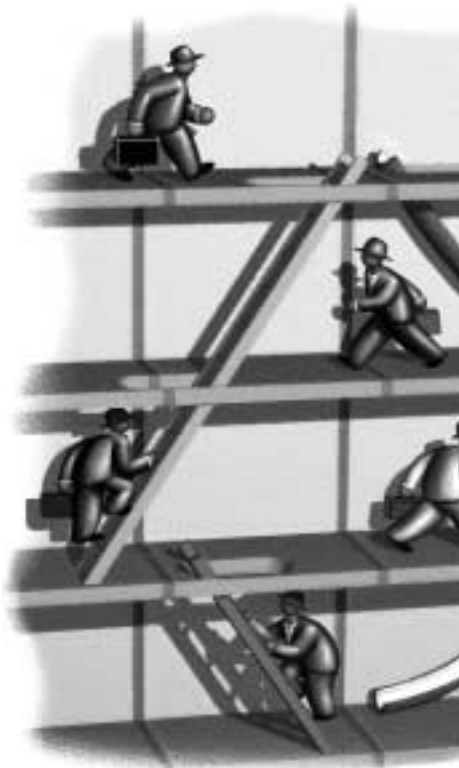
I'm a spiritual person and this represents to me God's goodness, bountiful, thankful. Ethics and morals would drive a corporation that I was in charge of.

[Old castle on a hill]

It depicts the new with the old. I think corporate America, both rebuilds and destroys. But the old, as far as going through an older town like Tiffin, Ohio, which is — you don't see a lot of new buildings coming up; whereas you walk through Columbus, Ohio and you'll see a lot of new prosperous with more of the financial district is and everything. It just shows that as the new buildings have come up, the older ones still deteriorate. We're rebuilding America.

[Rock climbing]

They are having to do team work up the hill and get each other up there in order to get all the way up.



[Wood paneled room]

It's got a lot of detail of old world craftsmanship. Everything is wood from the floor to the ceiling. It looks like in corporate America, if they could say we base our operations on this type of quality and this type of longevity.

[Train on a trestle]

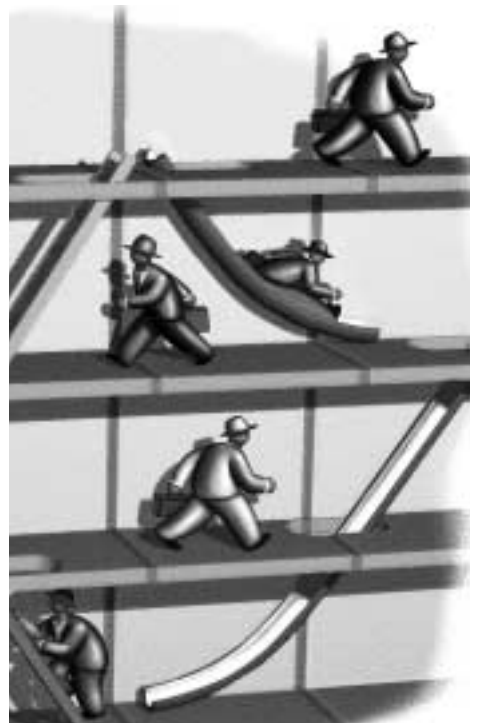
It's actually the trestle because this is exactly my opinion what is good about what we used to have in this country and what we don't have now. A company can't build this type of an enterprise today because it would take five years to put it together at a minimum and all we want to do now is sit there and play games and juggle things around, and what can I show as a phony or a real profit for next quarter? You can't build an intercontinental rail system today because they don't have the attention span.



[Well-to-do man on a boat]

I have a CEO on a boat here. That's the guy sitting in the boardroom. He's just waiting to get out, not worried about the company much.

[Stainless steel slide on a white background]



Not so much the slide but just the sterileness of it where companies nowadays they are interested in pretty much one thing and that is getting up to the top of this ladder and then they don't care how steep it is going down the hill.





